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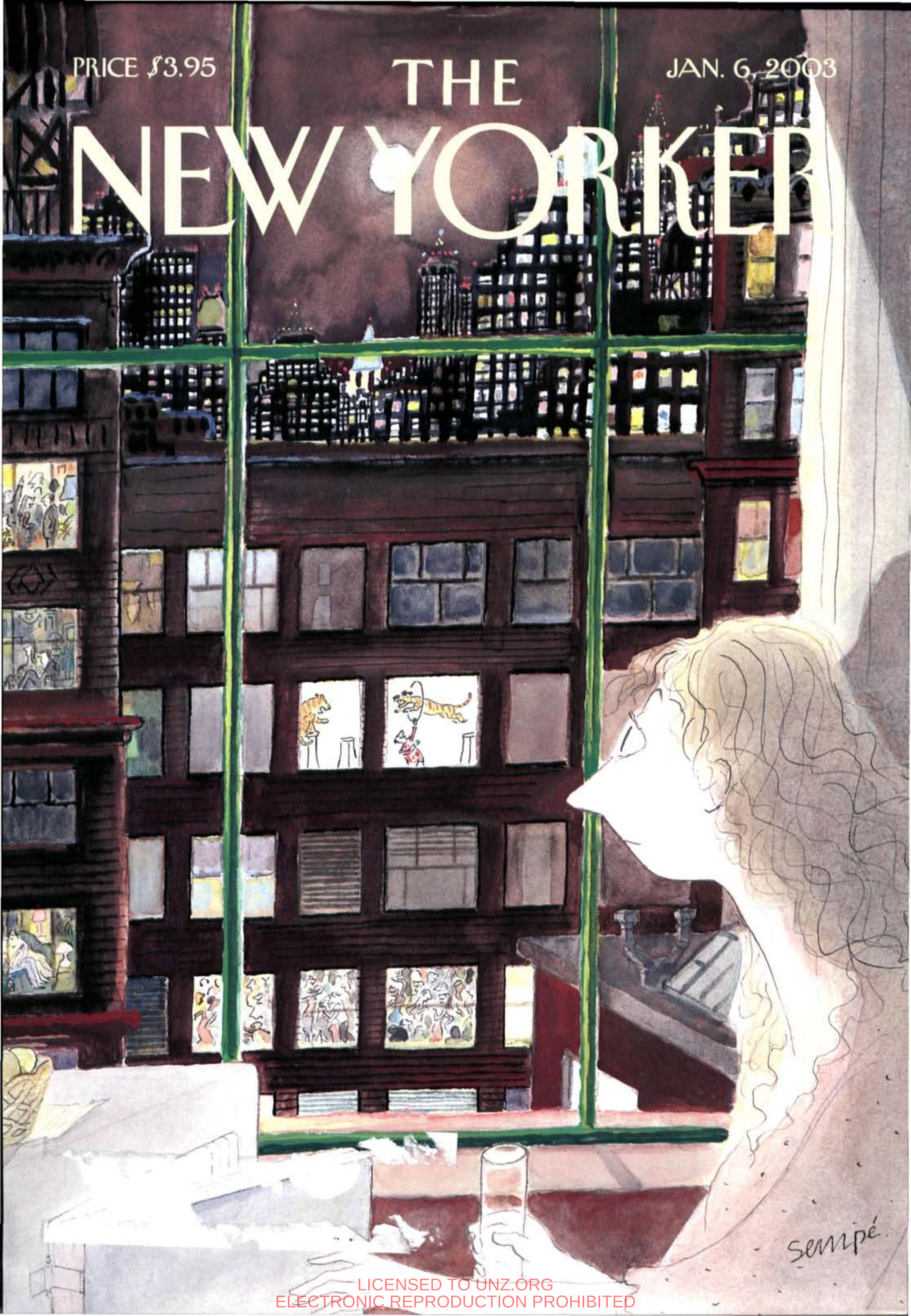
THE NEW YORKER

JAN. 6, 2003



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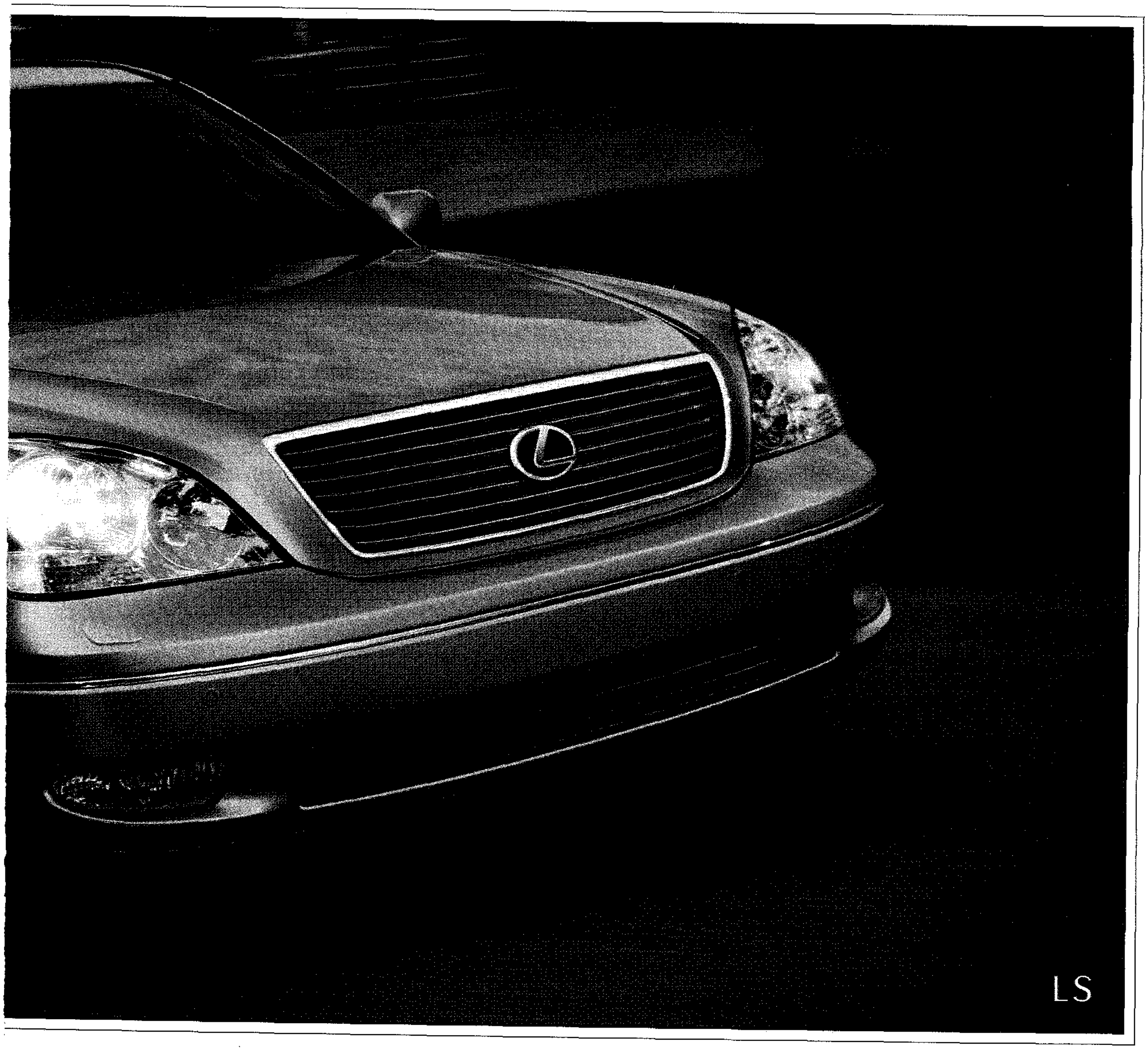

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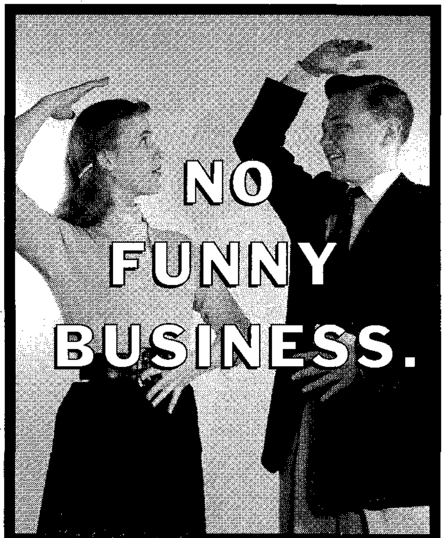

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Joan Acocella ("Second Act," p. 48) writes about dance and books for the magazine.

Italo Calvino ("Il Duce's Portraits," p. 34) died on September 19, 1985. A collection of his autobiographical writings, "The Hermit in Paris," will be published in March.

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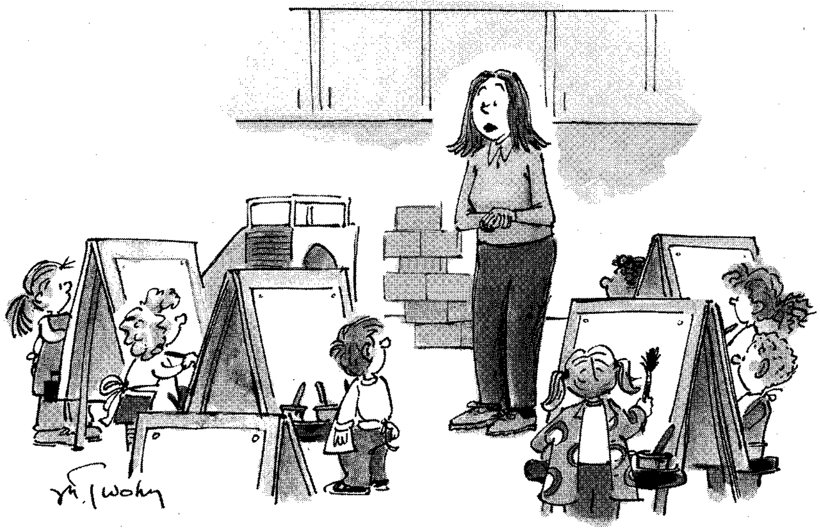

"Today we're going to explore in paint how we feel when we're picked up late from preschool."

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THE MAIL

DEGAS IN DETROIT

Arlene Croce's interpretation of Edgar Degas's "Mlle Fiocre in the Ballet 'La Source,'" now on exhibit here in Detroit, is very problematic ("Degas's Mystery Painting," December 2nd). Croce relies heavily on devices—allegory and geometry—that are given prominence nowhere else in Degas's work. It is hard to believe that someone as intelligent as Degas would be attracted to the hackneyed concept of the five senses, and there is no evidence that he had any time for the "occult symbolism" of geometry. Rather, it is the opposite: instead of picking up on Baudelaire's symbolism, he aggressively embraced his call to be "a painter of everyday life." But Degas is certainly mixing things up in this early work: artistic categories. "Mlle Fiocre" cleverly combines history painting, portraiture, genre painting, still-life, and landscape. The problem of subject matter in art was a hot topic in the eighteen-sixties, and Degas contributed to the debate with this work. It's possible that he included the five senses as an ironic gesture. Far more plausible ironies, however, are proposed by Jill DeVonyar and Richard Kendall in their book "Degas and the Dance."

Graham W. J. Beal
Director, Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Mich.

Croce views "Mlle Fiocre" in terms of its era's sensibilities. But the painting suggests more: a turning point for Degas. It is muddy both in concept and in execution. The faces are belabored, the fabric and the lighting lack expertise, the horse's anatomy is bizarre. Degas must have realized this; hence his decision to pull it from exhibition. One can see him deciding to put it aside, and to explore life and movement in the world as he saw it.

Rita Naughton
Trescott, Maine

CONTROLLING PRIVACY

Hendrik Hertzberg's alarm at recent assaults on privacy, of which the proposed projects of the Defense Department's Information Awareness Office is the latest, is well placed (The Talk of the Town, December 9th). It's worth noting that many of the Orwellian (or Philip K. Dick-ian) "gifts to the language" that he found on the office's Web site are also established technical terms in the jargon of artificial-intelligence, or A.I., research. "Truth maintenance" is a bookkeeping scheme in which a program calculates results from some inputs and then records the fact that the results depend on the inputs. The term "biologically inspired algorithms for agent control" sounds like something out of Michael Crichton but is actually a category of techniques for seeking solutions to complex problems. The connection to biology is always metaphorical; "agent" in this context means little more than "computer program." In 1981, Yale's Drew McDermott warned the A.I. community against its tendency to give grandiloquent names to simple ideas. The spread of that language has made his warning more cogent than ever.

Ernest Davis
Associate Professor of Computer Science
New York University
New York City

Hertzberg mentions some good reasons for shutting down the Information Awareness Office's plan to create a huge centralized database of information about all Americans. One that he doesn't include has to do with the database system's design: a centralized database is the most vulnerable choice possible, constituting an irresistible target for hackers. In a short time, the information would be accessible to people who either have terrorist designs or, like the originators of many computer viruses and worms, merely want to make our lives miserable.

James A. Wooster
Sumner, Wash.

•

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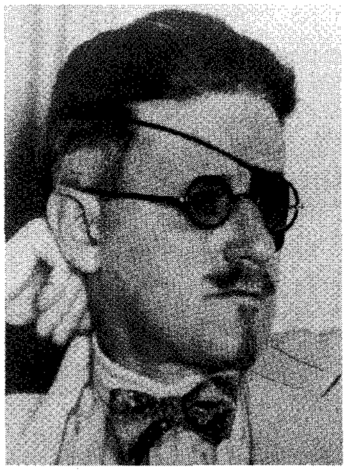
Loser.



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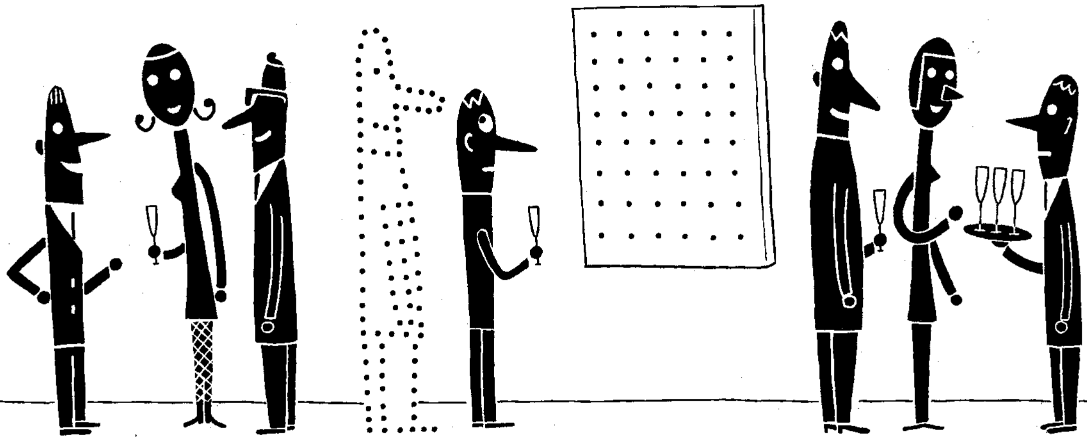

THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

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ART, LIFE, & SHOW-BIZ, A NON-FICTION PLAY
A much decorated Broadway trio—Helen Gallagher, Lola Pashalinski, and Valda Setterfield—present an insider's tribute to theatre and theatre people, written and directed by Ain Gordon. Opens Jan. 3 at 7:30. Through Jan. 26. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288.)

COMEDIANS
Jim Dale and Raul Esparza star in the New Group's revival of Trevor Griffiths' play about stand-up comics in Manchester, England, in the mid-nineteen-seventies. Directed by Scott Elliott. Previews begin Jan. 3. (Samuel Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

SHANGHAI MOON
The Drama Dept. presents a new play by Charles Busch ("The Tale of the Allergist's Wife"), set in Shanghai in 1931, about a young American woman who betrays her British diplomat husband and succumbs to the sensual seduction of the Orient. Busch plays the straying wife; B. D. Wong is her Asian paramour. Directed by Carl Andress. Previews begin Jan. 3. (Greenwich House, 27 Barrow St. 633-9632.)

TARTUFFE
Joe Dowling directs the Richard Wilbur translation of Molière's play, with Brian Bedford, Henry Goodman, and J. Smith-Cameron. In previews. (Roundabout, 227 W. 42nd St. 719-1300.)

OPENED RECENTLY

ADULT ENTERTAINMENT
Elaine May's laugh-out-loud sortie into public-access pornography, "Adult Entertainment," directed by Stanley Donen, features Heidi-the-Ho and her porn-star pals—who long to have words, not just organs, in their mouths. May loves her collection of lost meatheads, and her fine cast, including Danny Aiello, Jeannie Berlin, Eric Elice, and Linda Halaska, makes you care for them even as May pokes good fun at their stupidity. Some of this is wonderfully dopey—for instance, May's lewd lyrics in "Eatin' Box Lunch with You" and "Orangutan Bang," which goes, in part, "I wanna forneo / With big guys from Borneo." May is a joker who's still wild. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/23 & 30/02.) (Variety Arts, 110 Third Ave. 239-6200.)

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BETTY RULES
A kinetic alterna-rock musical, directed by Michael Greif ("Rent"), chronicling the nearly two-decade-long career of a real-life girl band called Betty and its members' battle to keep the group and their sanity intact on the road, at home, onstage, and even in therapy. (Zipper, 336 W. 37th St. 239-6200.)

BLUE/ORANGE
At the outset of Joe Penhall's sharply funny new play, a young white psychiatrist consults his supervisor about whether he should send a young black psychiatric patient home. Their debate—over whether it's patronizing to consider the man sick in the first place—quickly spirals out of control. (Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 239-6200. Closes Jan. 12.)

LA BOHÈME
Baz Luhrmann has reset Puccini's opera in a cinematic Paris of 1957—on the eve of Godard's "Breathless"—and his *moto*-ready cast of young studs looks the part. Rodolfo and Marcello wear leather jackets and boots, Mimi sports a trench coat, and the red-hot Musetta (Jessica Comeau) has hipster slacks and an Ann-Margret kittenishness. For Musetta's splendid "Quando me'n vo," the ensemble gathers on a silverized Parisian street that looks like a black-and-white Doisneau shot come to life. Rodolfo (David Miller) and Mimi (Ekaterina Solovyeva) have terrific voices, and they're both eye candy: he's a young Belmondo to her Eva Marie Saint. When this Rodolfo first lays eyes on this Mimi, enough heat jumps between the two of them to melt the snowflakes. It makes you want to hop a plane to Paris—the Paris in Baz Luhrmann's mind. Note: Three rotating casts perform the lead roles. (Broadway, 1681 Broadway, at 53rd St. 239-6200.)

BURN THIS
In Lanford Wilson's 1987 drama, an angry straight man meets his gay brother's roommates after his brother's death, forcing the characters to confront the lies they have told in their lives. Elisabeth Shue and Peter Sarsgaard play the leads. (Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 307-4100.)

CLASS MOTHERS OF '68
Here is a show for every woman who has ever sacrificed for her kids, and every kid who should be grateful. Does that leave anyone out? On a clever set (designed by Beowulf Boritt) that shifts, scene by scene, into the living rooms and lives of six different mothers, Priscilla Lopez portrays all the moms—each made fully individual by Lopez's gift for accents and physical expression, each connected by anxiety over her child's impending high-school graduation. To echo the working mother's dilemma: However does she do it? Written by Eric H. Weinberger and directed by Jeremy Dobrish. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

CROWNS
Regina Taylor's play, based on the eponymous book by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry, is an inquiry into the aesthetic of looking good in the African-American community—what it calls "hattitude." "Crowns" is an excellent theatrical idea, but it can't decide whether it is a gospel celebration or a sociological treatise, and it feels overlong at ninety minutes. (12/16/02) (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

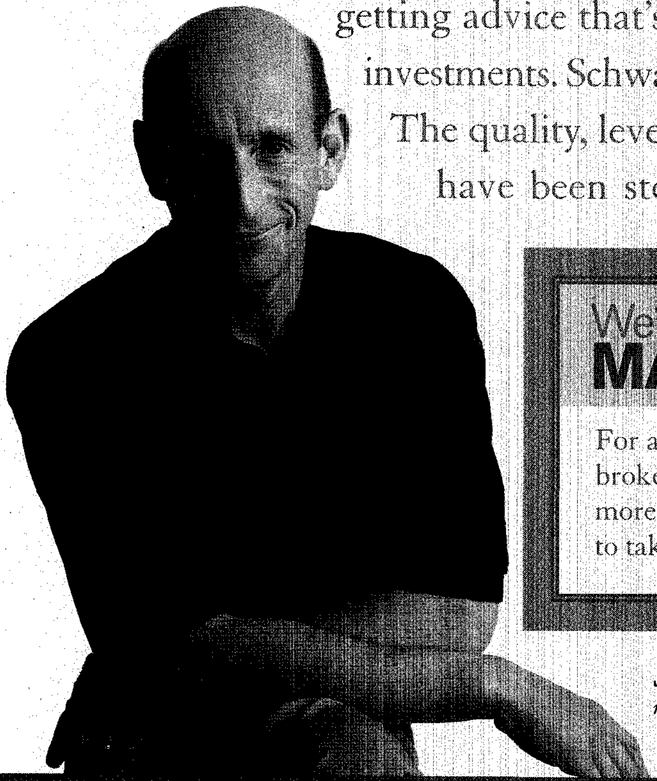
DANCE OF THE VAMPIRES
In this new musical, based on a Roman Polanski film and directed by John Rando, Michael Crawford plays an ancient vampire with a Romanian-Italian accent and a lust for the young virgin Sarah (shrilly played by Mandy Gonzalez). Most everything about the show is garish, from the trashy costumes to the Day-Glo makeup to the "Thriller"-inspired choreography to the Halloweeny sets. The music, written by the record producer Jim Steinman, leans heavily on his eighties hit "Total Eclipse of the Heart." Only Crawford emerges unscathed from this extended Meat Loaf video, although he is onstage far less than his large fan base might appreciate. (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

DEBBIE DOES DALLAS
A saucy postmodern musical, adapted from the porn film, and well played by Sherie Rene Scott (as Debbie), Mary Catherine Garrison, Jon Patrick Walker, Paul Fitzgerald, and others. (Jane Street Theatre, 113 Jane St. 239-6200.)

DINNER AT EIGHT
Gerald Gutierrez directs a new production of George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's 1932 play about a grand New York dinner party. Marian Seldes stars. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

THE EXONERATED
Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's pared-down play, directed by Bob Balaban, tells the harrowing stories of a handful of souls who have spent up to twenty-two years on death row before walking free. (10/28/02) (45 Bleecker Street Theatre, 45 Bleecker St. 307-4100.)

FAR AWAY
In Caryl Churchill's thrilling fable, a not-too-distant totalitarian society is engaged in a war of all against all. Humans, animals, nations, insects, the elements—even gravity—make and break alliances, with bloody consequences. The show's vivid, night-



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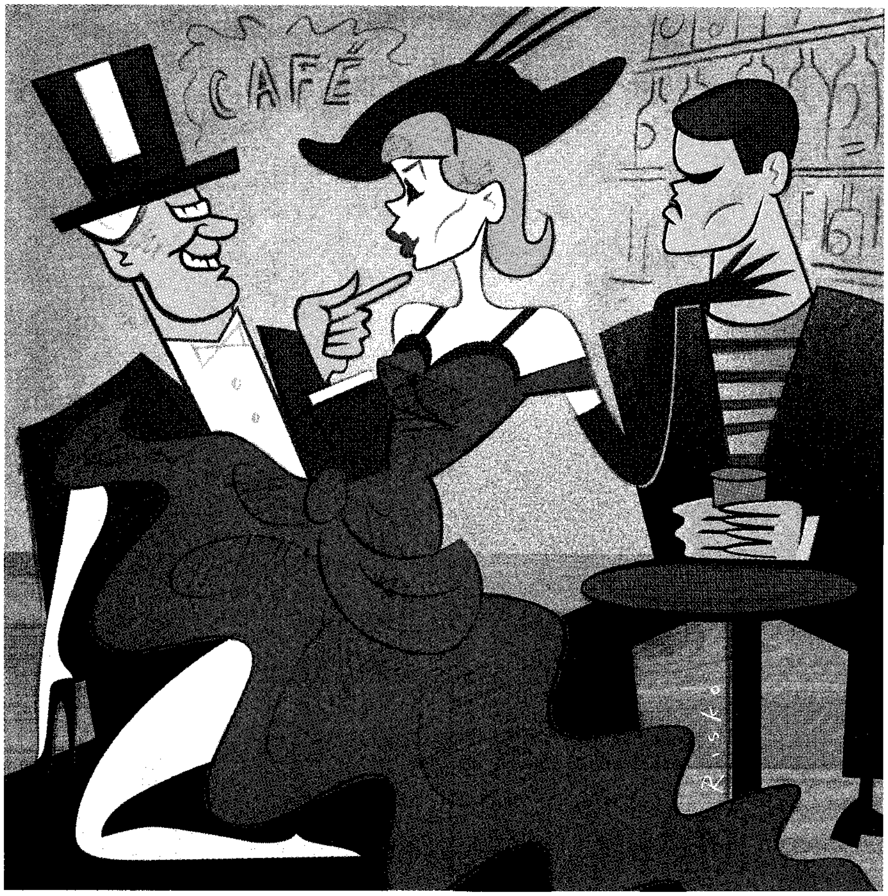

SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT *In Baz Luhrmann's "La Bohème," Mimi coughs her heart out, pining for Rodolfo, but the feisty Musetta juggles several lovers without catching her breath. As Musetta, Jessica Comeau joyously torments her suitors, singing of how she loves to court the male gaze: "I feed on the desire that smolders in their eyes / Their desire consumes me, it makes me happy / Yes, it makes me happy!"*

marish centerpiece, a fashion parade of the condemned, knocks the breath out of the audience. The exceptional cast includes Frances McDormand, Marin Ireland, and Chris Messina. The show is not to be missed. Directed by Stephen Daldry. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 239-6200.)

FLOWER DRUM SONG
Part fashion show, part night-club act, part hymn to Asian-American diversity, David Henry Hwang's update of the 1958 Rodgers and Hammerstein show, set in San Francisco's Chinatown, works far better than the original. With snazzy direction and choreography by Robert Longbottom and vivacious dancing by Sandra Allen. (11/4/02) (Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200.)

FRANKIE AND JOHNNY IN THE CLAIR DE LUNE
Edie Falco and Stanley Tucci star in Terrence McNally's sentimental two-character study about a man and a woman marginalized by life. Joe Mantello directs. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

GONE HOME
In the Manhattan Theatre Club production of John Corwin's play, Jack (Josh Hamilton) spends the first act awkwardly planted on a sofa. His wife (Chelsea Altman) has apparently dropped him off at his boyhood home so that he can make peace after a ten-year rift with his family. His interactions with his mother, father, and sister, directed with intentional detachment by David Warren, expose a deeply dysfunctional past but are strangely unaffecting. (131 W. 55th St. 581-1212. Closes Jan. 26.)

HAIRSPRAY
This musical-comedy version of the 1988 John Waters movie takes off from the opening number and never loses its momentum. In Baltimore in 1962, the rotund teen Tracy Turnblad (Marissa Jaret Winokur) wants to dance, make out with the best-looking boy in town, and integrate "The Corny Collins Show," a local teen-dance TV program. With the great Harvey Fierstein, plucked, shaved, and padded, as Tracy's mother, Edna Turnblad. (9/2/02) (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 307-4100.)

HANK WILLIAMS: LOST HIGHWAY
Jason Petty plays the legendary country-and-Western singer in a musical biography directed by Randal Myler. (Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 239-6200.)

HOLLYWOOD ARMS
Carol Burnett's lightly fictionalized memoir, written with her late daughter, Carrie Hamilton, stars Linda Lavin and is directed by Harold Prince. (11/18/02) (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

IMAGINARY FRIENDS
Nora Ephron's new "play with music" about the feud between Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman glitters with professionalism but to almost no point. The two divas—expertly played by Cherry Jones, as an eerie McCarthy look-alike, and Swoosie Kurtz, as the forked-tongued Hellman—bitch glibly at each other, but the actual story of the hatred between the two women is far uglier than anything they show us, and the range of Hellman's bad behavior was far worse. The music, by Marvin Hamlisch, features some clever lyrics by Craig Carnelia, which neither advance the notional plot nor illuminate its central issues, and the attempt to turn a literary circus into an intellectual vaudeville is gleeful but misguided. (12/23 & 30/02) (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

JOE AND BETTY
Not your typical Catskills play: in Murray Mednick's latest, Annabelle Gurwitch and Joe Diehl play a poor couple with six kids in a small town in the winter of 1951. He's feckless, but it slowly becomes clear that she's the bigger problem—she's descending into a profound depression. For a portrait of a disintegrating family, the evening affords a surprising amount of humor, and, although the direction is irritatingly stylized (at the whim of the playwright, the actors face the audience at all times), the cast overcomes it to create a sense of sad reality. Gurwitch's performance holds it all together: as the layers peel away from the banality of her daily struggle to feed her kids and pay her bills, revealing deeper troubles, her transformation is subtle and compelling. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

MAN OF LA MANCHA
If hearing "The Impossible Dream" four times without intermission is your idea of a good night out, then "Man of La Mancha" is for you. Superbly staged by Jonathan Kent, the show features a sensational set by Paul Brown that has more tricks than a circus pony, but no amount of proficient talent (Brian Stokes Mitchell is the nutty knight of faith, and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio is the toothsome tart Aldonza) and no amount of high-tech prowess can disguise the fact that this Don Quixote–Sancho Panza cartoon is romantic kitsch. (Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

MEDEA
In her daring modern interpretation of Euripides' drama, well directed by Deborah Warner, Fiona Shaw enters wearing sunglasses, a cardigan sweater, and a tidy summer dress, the picture of almost demure self-control. She has a lithe, muscular body and a sinuous mind to match, but she is a nervy woman pushed to the end of her tether, her mind and heart racing in adrenaline-pumping panic. Nothing she does onstage is generalized. Every line is parsed with clarity of feeling. "My lovely life is lost; I want to die," she says in her first speech—acknowledging that her husband, Jason (Jonathan Cake), is leaving her to marry a young princess. "He was everything to me—and now / He's the vilest man alive, my husband." Fuelled by envy's scorched-earth policy, which spoils all goodness, the barbarous and demented magic of revenge rears up before our sometimes averted eyes. (12/23 & 30/02) (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 307-4100.)

THE MERCY SEAT
MCC Theatre presents a new play by Neil LaBute, about how a relationship changes the day after 9/11, starring Liev Schreiber and Sigourney Weaver. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

MOVIN' OUT
Twyla Tharp's show about small-town teen-agers coming of age during the Vietnam War era is set to twenty-seven songs by Billy Joel. The band is terrific, and the dancers—above all, John Selya as the hero, Eddie—are positively on fire. (11/4/02) (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100.)

OUR TOWN
In a marvellous Broadway revival, directed by James Naughton, Thornton Wilder's play speaks as unforgettably now as it did at its première, in 1938. As the Stage Manager—the play's narrator and the link between the worlds of the living and the dead in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire—Paul Newman projects half a century's expertise and good will. God should look like Newman: lean, strong-chinned, white-haired, and authoritative in a calm and unassuming way. (12/16/02) (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

PORTERPHILES
Even when he was not the top, Cole Porter was still top hat and tails above most other songwriters. In the York Theatre's production of thirty new Porter songs—performed by the pianist Judy Brown, who discovered them—Lynne Halliday, Ricky Russell, and Stephen Zinnato serve up a cocktail menu of melodies that Porter wrote between 1911 and 1956 to accompany lyrics to songs that were never published. The best of the bunch is "Coffee," a paean to the restorative brew, sung by hung-over bons viveurs, and several story songs, including "I Wrote a Play," "The Extra Man," and "Where Would You Get Your Coat?" (with the Noël Cowardy lyrics "If home life didn't thrill a / South American chinchilla / Where would you get your coat?"), deserve to have a play writ-

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ten around them. But even a goof like "Tequila" has that glass-clinking magic. (Saint Peter's Theatre, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 239-6200.)

RUSSELL SIMMONS' DEF POETRY JAM ON BROADWAY
The hip-hop legend has brought together spoken-word stylists from his HBO show and from the national poetry-slam circuit to create an exuberant, defiant production. The rap bards deliver poems that are part autobiography, part social commentary—addressing everything from love, America, racism, and terrorism to Krispy Kreme doughnuts. (Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

SAY GOODNIGHT, GRACIE
Frank Gorshin is George Burns in Rupert Holmes's touching one-man tribute to the unsinkable comic and his more-than-a-sidekick wife, Gracie Allen. It's not just a showcase for one man; it's a showcase for an era. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

THE TEMPEST
The director Padraic Lillis has traded the strangeness and danger that are so often emphasized in Shakespeare's story for a more naturalistic presentation. As Prospero, the wronged Duke of Milan who becomes a magician in exile, Robert Hock seems like any doting father—who just happens to keep a sprite as a slave and have goddesses pay him social calls. Indeed, the stranded nobles who wash up on Prospero's shore are not so much afraid as bemused. The result is a sweet-natured storm that is less about power and revenge than about love and regret. The relationship between Prospero and Ariel (Celeste Ciulla) is especially poignant, and Dominic Cuskern, as a drunken jester, adds comic zing. (Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 598-9802.)

TOMMY TUNE: WHITE TIE AND TAILS
It's hard to resist the Colgate-bright charm and the joyous energy of Tommy Tune, so why try? In his first New York show in ten years, which inaugurates the Little Shubert Theatre, the towering Texan (he's just a hair over six feet six inches) sings, taps, and smiles his heart out. He adds a new element to the shtick: a trick he learned in Vegas called audience participation, which yields some amusing moments (when an elderly woman asked, "How old are you?" he answered with mock annoyance, "You bitch!"). He is backed by a sixteen-piece band and the natty Manhattan Rhythm Kings, a blended-harmony group that puts across old and new classics, from "Shanghai Lil" and "Fascinatin' Rhythm" to "When I'm Sixty-four" (Tune's age on his next birthday), with wit, finesse, and, sometimes, kazoo. (422 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

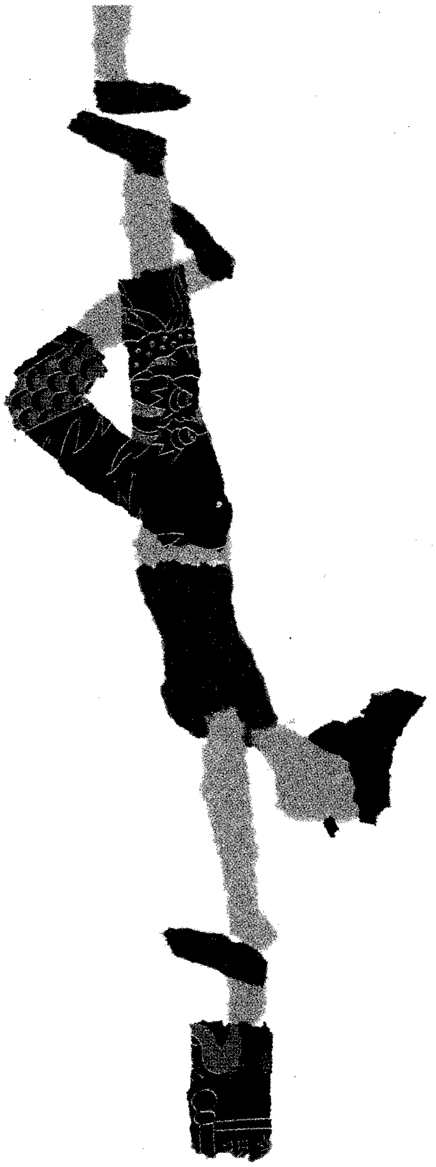
TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE
Based on Mitch Albom's best-selling book, the play is a love song to a wise old professor who taught an unreflective younger man how to feel. Alvin Epstein plays the mentor—Morrie Schwartz—with wit and heart, and John Tenney is touching as Mitch, the brusque mentee. Directed by David Esbjornson. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, east of Sixth Ave., between W. 3rd and Bleecker Sts. 307-4100.)

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
The final week of performances of Balanchine's "Nutcracker" is followed by the opening of the winter repertory season. ♦ "Nutcracker": Jan. 3 at 8, Jan. 4 at 2 and 8, and Jan. 5 at 1 and 5. ♦ Jan. 7 at 7:30: "Symphonic Dances," "In G Major," and "Western Symphony." (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 870-5570.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE
The City Center season continues, with twenty-one productions, including both new and repertory works, choreographed by Ohad Naharin, Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Francesca Harper, and others. ♦ Jan. 1 at 8: "Revelations" and other Ailey classics. ♦ Jan. 2 at 8: "Night Creature," "Cry," "Memoria," and "Revelations." ♦ Jan. 3 at 8: "Chocolate Sessions," "Sweet Bitter Love," "Episodes," and "Grace." ♦ Jan. 4 at 2: "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," "Vespers," and "Revelations." ♦ Jan. 4 at 8: "Apex," "Black Milk," "Trading," and "Prayers from the Edge." ♦ Jan. 5 at 3: "Apex," "Vespers," and "Revelations." ♦ Jan. 5 at 7:30: "The Winter in Lisbon," "Prayers from the Edge," and "Revelations." (131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

"ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT"
In "I Hear Mermaids Singing," his company's première at the Joyce's annual festival, Doug Elkins treats dance history like a sea to swim in. Seven dancers mix hula with salsa, mambo with go-go, capoeira with electric boogie, as they respond to musical "polyphony" (as Elkins calls it) from the islands of the South Seas. The result is an anthropological study of movement that is anything but dry: hips sway, legs pump, and torsos crest and fall like waves. Completing the program is an edited version of last year's "The Look of Love," inspired by Elkins's first crush (on his babysitter) and set to Burt Bacharach tunes. Jan. 3 at 8, Jan. 4 at 2, and Jan. 7 at 8. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave. 242-0800. The festival continues through Jan. 19.)



The New Shanghai Circus, now at the New Victory Theatre.

EILZA GRAN

NEW SHANGHAI CIRCUS
This acrobat-rich, animal-free circus is electrifying in its intricacy and invention. In one number, a young woman dressed in spandex and sequins (as is nearly everyone in the twenty-person company) floats in arabesque, balances on one hand atop a man's head, and executes precision archery with her feet. In another number, a reclining woman raises her legs and makes her feet into a midair platform. When a female acrobat mounts the platform, the feet spin her around—first like a top, and then, catapulting her into a continuous round of back flips, like a hamster wheel whirring in reverse. The show begins with daring, and the glorious outlandishness only increases as the acts continue. It's a two-hour production that manages to keep even young children happy throughout its duration. Jan. 2-3 at 7, Jan. 4 at 2 and 7, and Jan. 5 at noon and 5. Through Jan. 12. (New Victory Theatre, 209 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

CONTEMPORARY DANCE SHOWCASE
The Japan Society presents the work of four young female choreographers from Japan, making their New York débuts. Nibroll, a seven-member dance collective, uses multimedia displays and frantic, absurdist movement to express the brutality of urban life. The work of Dance Theatre Ludens is more intimate—and more affecting. In a typical duet, a man crawls after choreographer-dancer Takiko Iwabuchi, but she keeps slipping away. When he rubs his chin against one of her ankles and rolls his bald head up and down her leg, it looks as if she's playing with a soccer ball. Iwabuchi's dances are filled with such oddly touching moments. Also featured is the deliberately amateurish company Strange Kinoko and a solo by Akemi Takeya that blends pantomime and spoken-word poetry. Each program will be preceded by "Dancing in the Diaspora," a mini-showcase of U.S.-based Japanese choreographers. Jan. 10-11: "Dancing in the Diaspora" at 7; main programs at 8:30. (Japan Society, 333 E. 47th St. 832-1155.)

NIGHT LIFE
CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (997-4144)—Jan. 3-4: The **Wailers** are the Jamaican reggae outfit that once backed the music's greatest ambassador, Bob Marley. The legendary vocalist and his colleague Peter Tosh are dead and Bunny Wailer is no longer with the band, but the original bassist, Aston (Family Man) Barrett, is still at the helm, and the music remains as uplifting and welcome as ever.

BLARNEY STAR
43 Murray St. (732-2873)—Jan. 3: The button accordionist **Joe Madden,** a Galway native turned New Yorker, is joined by his daughter **Joanie,** the leader of the all-women ensemble Cherish the Ladies, and the keyboardist, vocalist, and guitarist **Gabe Donohue.**

BOTTOM LINE
15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—Jan. 4: **Professor Louie and the Crowmatix.** The Professor (a.k.a. Aaron Hurwitz) is a city boy who spent much of the past decade out in the country, often in the company of members of the Band. With the Crowmatix he specializes in an all-American blend of roots rock. Also on the bill are the **Kerry Kearney Band** and the **Zen Tricksters.**

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—**Versus,** a long-running New York combo with a gift for Sonic Youth-style droning, stops by on Jan. 4.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—Jan. 3-4: Even the surliest of local metalheads will have cause to celebrate as the Brooklyn thrash outfit **Life of Agony** reunites for two nights of raised fists, furrowed brows, and piercingly high decibels. ♦ The Swing Dance Society gathers here the first Sunday of every month, with sets from eight until midnight. For information on the Society, call 696-9737.

LUXX
256 Grand St., Williamsburg (718-599-1000)—Professor Jef is an intermittent teacher of New York City rock-and-roll history at N.Y.U. who's also been helping to write a few new chapters of it

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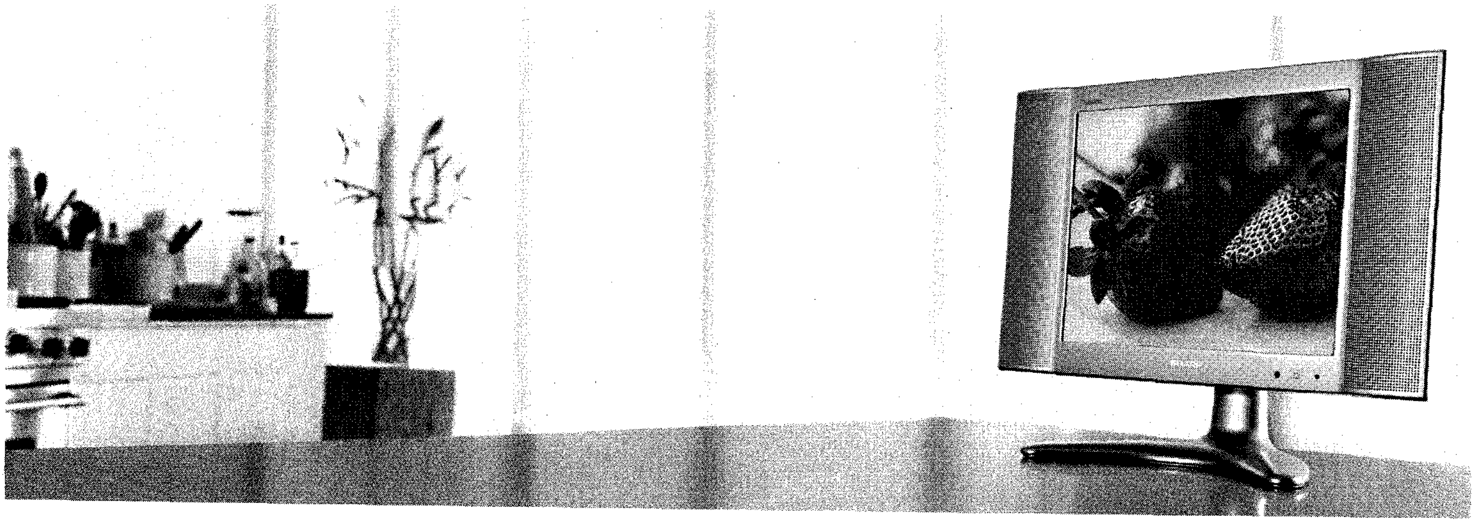

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with his monthly series called Terrorsex Cabaret. The bands he invites step across genres; whether they're punk, post-punk, or cabaret, they all tend to be quite intense. On Jan. 5 he presents **Lovelife,** a quartet from Baltimore that features a guitorgan (a guitar-organ combination) and a riveting, tortured PJ Harvey-like lead singer, Katrina Ford; their vibe is pure black velvet and dripping candles. Also appearing is the macabre chanteuse **Sally Norvell,** from the dark and throaty Congo Norvell, and **Barbez,** Brooklyn's own brooding and winking art-rock ensemble.

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (260-4700)—Jan. 4: The **National,** a band composed of two sets of brothers and a friend who left their native Ohio and moved to Brooklyn, carries on in the vein of the great Midwestern indie rockers Guided by Voices, with a touch of East Coast angst.

NORTHSIX
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg (718-599-5103)—Jan. 3: Gloriously opposed to all manifestations of political correctness, the **Moistboyz** are an obstreperous pair of hooligans (featuring one-half of the equally mischievous duo Ween) who revel in deliberately offensive and aggressive rock. Despite some of the band's more disquieting and intolerant lyrics, they're more black humored than black hearted, although the guise of parody can only excuse so much.

S.O.B.'S
204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (243-4940)—Jan. 2: The long-running monthly **Basement Bhangra** party features ecstatic, futuristic dance music and fuses an ancient Punjabi harvest festival with the technological wonders of underground London. Jan. 3: **Pucho and His Latin Soul Brothers.** Henry (Pucho) Brown and the Latin Soul Brothers turned out eight records between 1966 and 1969, and he played Carnegie Hall in 1967, but he spent the next two decades entertaining folks in the Catskills. In the early nineties, Pucho became a cult figure in London, as the dance-music scene there picked up his old recordings. He's been touring overseas ever since, and now he's brought his funky brand of Latin soul back home. Dining.

SOUTHPAW
125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope (718-230-0236)—Jan. 4: The **Aluminum Group** is the creation of two stylish brothers from Chicago, Frank and John Navin, who have a love of good design (the group takes its name from a line of furniture by Charles and Ray Eames) and intricately crafted, urbane songs.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

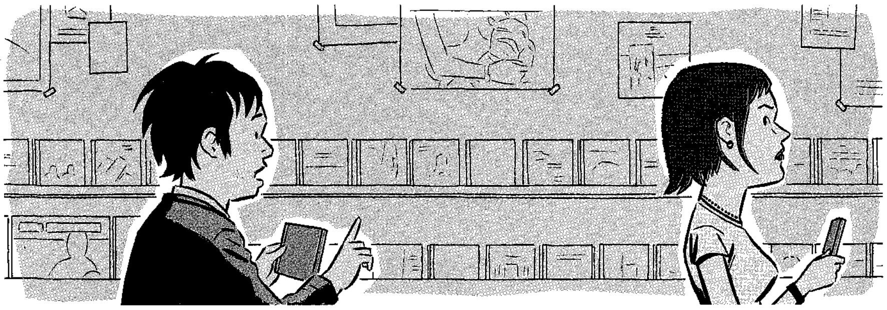
ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (840-6800)—The cabaret icon **Andrea Marcovicci,** currently at work in the woody nook known as the Oak Room, may not always have a dulcet tone, but her masterly interpretive skills and her charming way with an anecdote more than compensate for the rough spots in her delivery. She's performing the can't-lose love songs of Cole Porter through Jan. 12. Dining.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—Jan. 3-4: Lip problems are the bane of trumpet players' lives, and the once indestructible **Freddie Hubbard** isn't immune to them. The spirit is still willing, though, and, with the support of the ambitious young acolytes that make up the New Jazz Composers Octet, "the Hub" will give it his best shot. Sundays: The **Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Jazz Big Band.** The composer and arranger Chico O'Farrill, one of the grand architects of Afro-Cuban music, may no longer be with us, but his practiced big band, now in its fifth year at this venue, is under the sure hand of O'Farrill's son Arturo, himself a dynamo of a pianist.

POP NOTES

Favorites from our 2002 CD rotation, listed alphabetically.

Beck, "Sea Change" (Interscope)—It's hard for Beck to release a record without reviving the time-honored, and somewhat timeworn, question of his authenticity. Is he an ironist in mannerist's clothing? A mannerist with the heart of a collagist? A parodist with a genius for pastiche? The matter isn't settled with this record, a set of moody breakup ballads that seems like a calculated rejection of the white-boy funk of his last album, "Midnite Vultures." But after immersing yourself in the beautiful melodies and the surprisingly inventive production, you may not care.



Solomon Burke, "Don't Give Up On Me" (Anti)—The singer and songwriter Joe Henry has had an erratic career as an artist, but he redeems himself completely as a producer, overseeing this full-fledged comeback by one of the most flamboyant and sublime soul singers of the sixties. Burke was great back when he was belting out "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love" and "Cry to Me"; here, he's even better, tearing into songs donated by Elvis Costello, Tom Waits, Van Morrison, Brian Wilson, and Bob Dylan.

Manu Chao, "Radio Bemba Sound System" (Virgin)—Born in Paris to Spanish parents, Chao sings in the languages of his birthplace, his ancestors, and contemporary commerce (English). But Chao is no free-market cheerleader, and this collection, which was recorded last year during his epic world tour, includes sharp-edged songs from his earlier days in Mano Negra (the French rock group named after an Andalusian anarchist group) and his two recent solo albums.

Missy Elliott, "Under Construction" (Elektra)—Elliott's previous album with her producer Timbaland, "Miss E . . . So Addictive," was a breakthrough, unpredictable and full of humor. Here, she and Timbaland refine their sound, simplifying the beats and thickening the melodies. Elliott's raps, while sometimes raunchy, are never crass. The first single, "Work It," is an instant classic along the lines of her earlier hit "Get Ur Freak On," and the entire record is dirty fun for the whole family.

The Flaming Lips, "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots" (Warner)—In this delicious caricature of a full-blown rock opera, Wayne Coyne and his fellow Oklahoman visionaries have once again created an enveloping sonic utopia. This time, the Lips take inspiration from the Starburst-colored world of Japanese *anime,* as the black-belt heroine Yoshimi battles with Goliath-like foes amid Cat Stevens melodies, pulsing Ms. Pac-Man beats, heart-tugging symphonic interludes, and the occasional swell of canned applause.

The Hives, "Veni Vidi Vicious" (Warner)—This five-man Swedish band, fronted by the irrepressible Howlin' Pelle Almqvist—who can come off as a true garage-rock savant or a second-rate Mick Jagger—may not have sold as many records as the Vines or graced as many magazine covers as the Strokes, but they have better clothes, better videos, and, most important, better songs ("Main Offender," "Hate to Say I Told You So").

N.E.R.D., "In Search of . . ." (Virgin)—Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo (two-thirds of this group, along with the rapper-vocalist Shay) are better known as the producing duo the Neptunes, who have created hits for everyone from Britney Spears to LL Cool J, but their performance outlet is equally important. The band's name stands for No One Ever Really Dies, and the record, which combines a hip-hop sensibility with live rock instrumentation, is as slap-happy as a great George Clinton album.

Orchestra Baobab, "Pirates Choice" (Nonesuch)—This double album of languid Cuban-influenced Afro-pop is technically a reissue, but as it marks the return of the legendary Senegalese orchestra (which released another fine album in 2002, "Specialist in All Styles") and as the new version includes six additional tracks from the original 1982 recording session, it deserves special notice. The orchestra's sweet guitar work, romantic horn playing, and warm vocalizing have been too hard to come by for too long.

Queens of the Stone Age, "Songs for the Deaf" (Interscope)—This irreverent guitar-wielding collective, which features special guests like the former Screaming Trees vocalist Mark Lanegan and the powerhouse drummer Dave Grohl alongside head Queen Josh Homme, fluctuates between pummelling rock and sprawling psychedelia. Interspersed with snippets of radio gibberish lampooning the state of today's Top 40, the album is smart, subversive, and seductive.

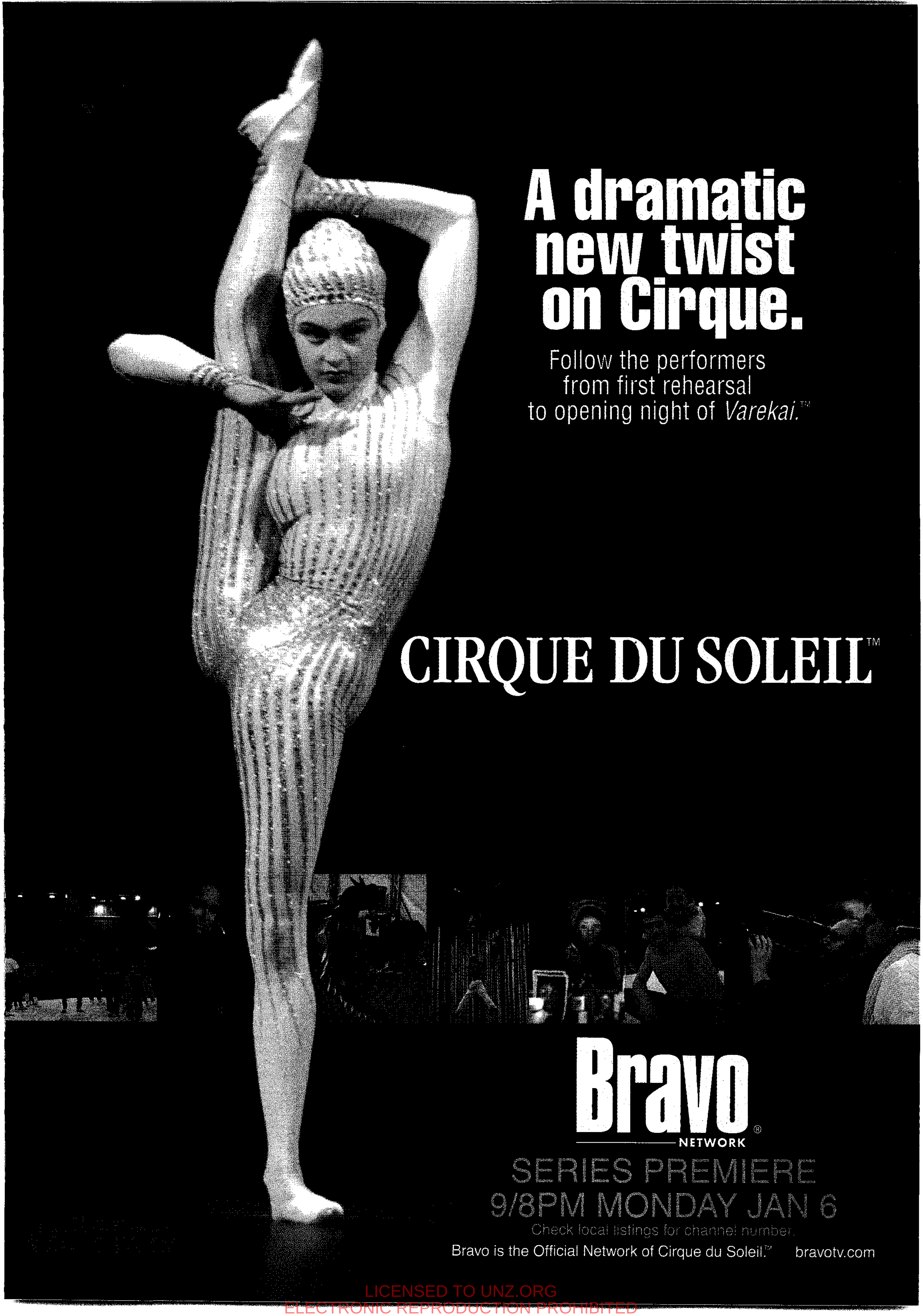
Sleater-Kinney, "One Beat" (Kill Rock Stars)—Motherhood and endless praise haven't mellowed the Northwest's premier all-female power trio, who turn in one of their most ferocious albums yet, complete with an ode to parenting and a one-two punch of September 11th songs. Critics' darlings, maybe, but for once the critics are right.

Spoon, "Kill the Moonlight" (Merge)—Propelled by throbbing electric piano, skittering tambourine, and the raw, Merseybeat-inspired vocals of their able songwriter Britt Daniel, the fourth release from these acclaimed Austin upstarts is their best yet. Unlike many neo-garage bands, Spoon actually has ideas, along with the rock-and-roll wherewithal to make them dangerous and sexy.

Wilco, "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" (Nonesuch)—This enthusiastically left-field and briefly orphaned record is filled with world-weary tunes and anxious instrumentation. Mangled feedback, delicate strumming, and soulful keyboards swirl and harmonize, while the front man, Jeff Tweedy, sings about his midnight blues. There are no hit singles here, just a brilliant, battered album from one of the world's most original bands.

Also noteworthy: Cody Chesnutt, "The Headphone Masterpiece" (Ready Set Go!); James Luther Dickinson, "Free Beer Tomorrow" (Artemis); Tift Merritt, "Bramble Rose" (Lost Highway); Ron Sexsmith, "Cobblestone Runway" (Nettwerk); various artists, "This Is Where I Belong: The Songs of Ray Davies & the Kinks" (Rykodisc).

ADRIAN TOMINE



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AND: A calendar of *New Yorker* events across the country

Mondays: The **Toshiko Akiyoshi Jazz Orchestra.** In keeping her big band afloat for four decades now, the extravagantly inventive pianist, composer, and arranger Akiyoshi has defied all the odds and then some. The ensemble is always packed with skillful and inspired soloists; Akiyoshi's husband, the tenor saxophonist and flutist **Lew Tabackin,** is a dependable feature. Dining.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—Through Jan. 5: **Chick Corea's** trio thrills on a regular basis. The celebrated leader, now in his sixties, displays the same relentless energy and invention as his two younger, equally remarkable bandmates, the bassist **Avishai Cohen** and the drummer **Jeff Ballard.** They're joined here by another Corea compatriot, the pioneering vibraphonist **Gary Burton.**

CAJUN
129 Eighth Ave., at 16th St. (691-6174)—It's not as if **Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks** are obsessed with the music of the twenties and thirties—they've even been known to slip in a number or two from the forties as well. Manning the most unwieldy of instruments (bass, tuba, bass saxophone) as well as a bulbous vintage Kellogg microphone, Giordano leads a tuxedo-clad twelve-piece band whose ease with early jazz and swing breathes life into an overlooked era. Authenticity and affection, rather than nostalgia and affectation, are what power this valuable and enjoyable ensemble. They're here on Mondays and Thursdays. The rest of the week features combos fluent in Dixieland jazz and other improvisational sounds of New Orleans.

CORNELIA STREET CAFÉ
29 Cornelia St. (989-9319)—Jan. 7: Although the much-in-demand bassist **Sean Smith** exhibits a special rapport with pianists—he's worked with Bill Charlap and is now featured in Jacky Terrason's band—a keyboard plays no part in Smith's own ensemble. His strong book of original pieces is fleshed out by the distinctive textures of a guitar-and-trumpet front line.

FIREBIRD
365 W. 46th St. (586-0244)—Jan. 6: The comedian and entertainer **Mark Nadler,** a man who has accompanied the drag performer Dame Edna on Broadway and who is known for tap dancing and playing the piano at the same time, presides over the opening of a new, hundred-seat room on the second floor of this Slavic-themed Restaurant Row institution. Nadler will be performing a program called "Tchaikowsky (and Other Russians)," in which he promises to spend the evening humorously deconstructing the Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin song. Nadler is also here on Wednesdays and Thursdays through Jan. 24.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (582-2121)—Through Jan. 5: The **McCoy Tyner** trio, with the saxophonist **Michael Brecker.** For his many fans who acknowledge Brecker as John Coltrane's heir, this is a dream gig: their hero standing shoulder to shoulder with Coltrane's iconic pianist. Those with a little more objectivity will at least appreciate Brecker's bravery in sharing a stage with the mighty Tyner. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—The brassman **Steve Bernstein** may have been born in the wrong time. This former Lounge Lizard is a fully formed new-jazz modernist, but he also harbors longings for the days when scrappy regional big bands circled the nation, battling each other for momentary supremacy. Bernstein has assembled a beaut of an ensemble in his Millennial Territory Orchestra, which appears here Jan. 3-5. It's full of such hard-line players as the saxophonist **Peter Apfelbaum,** the violinist **Charlie Burnham,** and the bassist **Ben Allison.** The leader's most pressing problem, it seems, is a lack of healthy competition. Dining.

KNICKERBOCKER
33 University Pl., at 9th St. (228-8490)—Two-thirds of the **Bill Mays** trio, one of the great bands nobody knows, can find joy even in reduced circumstances. The pianist Mays and the bassist **Martin Wind** (here together Jan. 2-4) produce sparks with or without percussive support.

SMOKE
2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. (864-6662)—Jan. 3-4: If obscurity has any advantage at all, it's the purity of style that isolation breeds. The trumpeter and flugelhornist **Danny Moore** isn't the great lost jazzman of the age; he's just a polished, vital player whose biting runs and vocal phrases are untouched by fashionable tics.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—Through Jan. 5: **Dr. Michael White's Original Liberty Jazz Band of New Orleans.** The clarinettist and musicologist White is a proud scion of New Orleans who lives to celebrate the riches of jazz's first golden era. His exuberant renditions of classics by Armstrong, Bechet, King Oliver, and other Big Easy icons are sure to bring Southern sunshine to our wintry city. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

TABLES FOR TWO

SAPORI D'ISCHIA
55-15 37th Ave., at 56th St., Woodside, Queens (718-446-1500)—By day, this cinder-block storefront is an import business, a purveyor of *ceci* beans, balsamic vinegars, and wholesale cheeses from the old country. By night, it's a valet-parking trattoria with a gift for excess: Thursday and Sunday evenings, for example, opera singers in business attire serenade the diners tableside. Day or night, it's a volume business.

The food is all very *vincerò!, vincerò!, vincerò!,* stagy and built for big Italian wines. The salad of field greens, usually a demure choice of appetizers, arrives looking like an endive warhead until you slip off the tiny garter of red pepper at the top and the whole thing collapses in a frilly spread like a cancan dancer. Among the pastas, the Oscar goes to the fettuccine all'Antonio, with prosciutto and truffle oil, which is pushed out on a dessert cart and is tossed right in front of you, inside a big wheel of Parmesan cheese. The wines, mostly small-production labels such as Sagrantino di Montefalco and Begali Amarone that go well with cured meats, prove that the importers, Frank Galano and his son Anthony, take their working vacations seriously. In a similar spirit, the waiters make a production out of decanting them.

On a recent opera night (they substitute Neapolitan music on Tuesdays and Wednesdays), the place was full, mostly with dressy, First Communion-style family gatherings that filled the room with a raucousness that rivalled the Russian tenor's. The big seatings temporarily cut off access to the back wall of refrigerated display cases—but get friendly enough with your neighbors and they might pass you a cheese or a salami to add to your bill. One comfort that no one should skip is the chocolate pizza, which is a sort of Italianate improvement on the Pop-Tart: a core of Nutella between two thin layers of crispy crust, all of it covered with powdered sugar and an Expressionist choco-drizzle. (Open weekdays for deli-style breakfast and lunch; Tuesdays through Sundays for dinner. Entrées $7.50-$59.)

—Kevin Conley

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—**"The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353."** From a show named after a man on the move, you'd expect what? Gilded tent flaps? They're here, but the focus is on an urbane,

nearly hundred-year dynasty that was founded in Iran by Hülegü, a grandson of Genghis. Ceremonial and decorative objects and lots of illustrated manuscripts—not to mention dauntingly profuse curatorial wall texts—document a cosmopolitan milieu in which Islamic styles got infused with Chinese ideas. Educational. Through Feb. 16. ♦ **"French Nineteenth-Century Drawings in the Robert Lehman Collection"** is a refreshing show whose sensibility tends to the lite: chic Ingres portraits, droll Daumiers, dreamy Barbizon landscapes, Constantin Guys, Degas dancers, minor Neo-Impressionists, Suzanne Valadons. In this company, the greatness of Seurat's "Model Facing Front" stuns. Milder surprises include a group of watercolors by Renoir that make one wish the artist had done more in that medium, which favors his genius as oils often don't. Through Feb. 9. ♦ **"Richard Avedon: Portraits."** Through Jan. 5. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA QNS)

33rd St. at Queens Blvd., Long Island City (708-9400)—**"Drawing Now: Eight Propositions,"** a trailblazing show curated by Laura Hoptman, sets the MOMA seal of approval on twenty-six youngish international artists working in the medium that's been the bedrock of visual art since Lascaux. Hoptman's "propositions" identify current modes of drawing, including illustration, decoration, fashion, architectural and scientific drafting, and comics. The show suggests a forge of styles, in which artists hammer out new links between craft, discipline, and worldly import. Some—John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Neo Rauch, Ugo Rondinone—are farther along than others, but nearly all convey the exhilaration of being onto something. For the first time in quite a while at a museum group show, exacting comparison, argument, and judgment seem to be a matter of course. Don't miss this. Through Jan. 6. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 10 to 5, and Friday evenings until 7:45.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—In one projection in **"Going Forth by Day,"** Bill Viola's visually striking five-channel video piece commissioned by a German bank for the Guggenheim Berlin, an eclectic procession traipses through a light-dappled forest (the panoramic image evokes old-fashioned CinemaScope). In an adjacent scene, water gushes from the windows and doors of a pristine building façade. Death and resurrection figure elsewhere in the action, as Viola tackles Big Themes. Through Jan. 12. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—Although Gee's Bend, Alabama, is isolated by poverty and a sharp curve in the Alabama River, the group of hamlets there has for generations fostered quilt-making as a virtuoso performance in frugality. Sixty-nine hand-sewn quilts, dating from the thirties to the present and incorporating a wild variety of geometries, colors, and fabrics, are on view. Though the women of the African-American community—many of them members of the local Pettway clan—quilt and sing together (a documentary film showing continuously in the gallery broadcasts the sewing circles' amazing harmonies), no two quilts are alike. Each woman has a fiercely individual approach. The visual compositions are electric with abstraction of the most visceral sort, aesthetically inventive and born of necessity. Through March 2. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6; Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART

Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Exposed: The Victorian Nude,"** from Tate Britain, is a strong historical show about an era when jumpiness about sex had bizarre effects in art. Literary and classical themes provided the alibis for displaying naked females. Popular guises included Shakespearean fairies, virtuous heroines (Lady Godiva rides again, and again), Roman decadents, and the like. For male nakedness, the excuse was propaganda for robust healthiness. Lust lurked, and smut reigned. A turn toward frankness around the turn of the century—in the gloomy nudes of Walter Sickert and the too little known William Orpen—offers a fresh invention: actual people. Orpen's felicitously titled "The English Nude" (1900), a Rembrandtesque tour de force, presents a regular, interesting woman on a rumpled bed. Its mystery is that of a really lived life. Through Jan. 5. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

Andrea Marcovicci, at the Algonquin (see Night Life).

JOSÉ LUIS MERINO

FRICK COLLECTION

1 E. 70th St. (288-0700)—Another de-luxe loan show, this time from Ohio's Toledo Museum of Art, supplements the collection's riches. The dozen visiting pictures include major delights by El Greco, Boucher, Gainsborough, Courbet, and Cézanne. The centerpiece, though, is "Flight Into Egypt," by the sixteenth-century Venetian heavyweight Jacopo Bassano. A friezelike procession chops the canvas into marvellous details: a wrist; a thigh; a mule's despondent eye; two chickens hanging upside down; the Virgin's sidelong glance at her son, the source of all the ruckus. Bassano clearly had the musical rhythms of Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne" in the back of his mind, but his version challenges the older Venetian's in its mastery. Through Jan. 5. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6; Friday evenings until 9.)

MUSEO DEL BARRIO

Fifth Ave. at 104th St. (831-7272)—For its biennial survey of work by Latino and Latin-American artists, El Museo offers a pleasantly unwieldy spectrum of projects: videos, installations, and paintings, along with a giant simian robot and a public-relations campaign organized by a Spanish artist, Paco Cao, which aims to find a look-alike for Velázquez's Juan de Pareja. There's no discernible link among the art works, but the printed statements share a curious predilection for Anglo-American academic jargon: everyone claims to be "problematizing" the self, exploring "hidden heterotopias," etc. Even playful projects take on a graduate-school tone. A video Scrabble game spells out names like Baudrillard, Debord, and Adorno. Through Feb. 16. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 to 5.)

NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

583 Broadway (219-1222)—This is the first museum show in the United States for Nalini Malani, a Bombay artist born in Karachi in 1946, two years before the partition of Pakistan and India. Her impenetrable video installation is apparently an allegory of the rising Hindu-Muslim conflict in South Asia. But viewers are unlikely to glean that from the work itself, which combines fragments of text from Heiner Muller's play "Hamletmachine" with imagery of Japanese Butoh performers, gasping fish, a portrait of Hitler, and Coca-Cola signs. Through Jan. 12. ♦ This survey of the work of Carroll Dunham is a joyride of a show spanning the twenty-year career of a painter whose inspirations run from Surrealism to Saturday-morning cartoons. The earliest works, explosive abstractions painted on board in a palette reminiscent of Kandinsky, introduce the biomorphic blobs and libidinal tubers that remain part of Dunham's vocabulary as his paintings shift toward representation (lately, his blobs have sprouted teeth and spurting phallic noses). As if retracing the development of civilization, Dunham's early primordial abstractions give way to internecine battles of angry shapes that have recently evolved into citified roughnecks dressed in suits and stovepipe hats. Throughout the evolution, Dunham's deep commitment to painting shines through with ferocity and a strange grace. Through Feb. 2. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, noon to 6, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

GALLERIES-UPTOWN

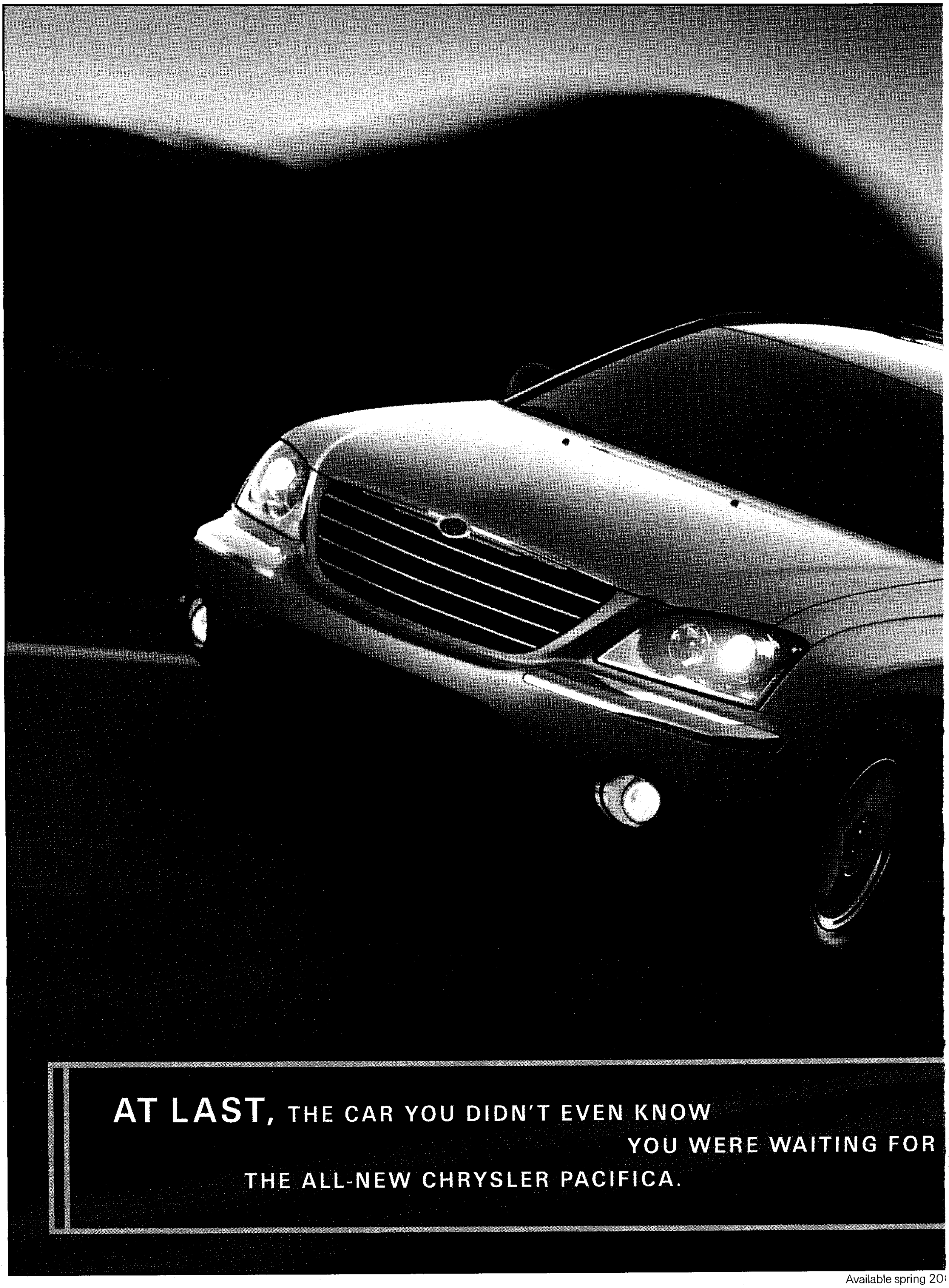
Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

JIM DINE

Viewers who wonder whether we really need more "Tool Paintings" may be surprised by these big, casually elegant assemblages composed mostly of actual hardware. Hammers, shovels, pitchforks, wrenches, axes, tree branches, and even a chain saw have been bolted onto big colorful panels, then cuffed, battered, and splattered with paint. Rauschenberg and Johns pioneered this kind of literalist bas-relief, but they have gone on to other things. Dine, a true believer, gives their legacy his own scuffed, seductive, rural spin. Through Jan. 4. (Pace Wildenstein, 32 E. 57th St. 421-3292.)

AL HELD / GEORGE SUGARMAN

Brilliant small works from the early sixties by two artists who charted independent courses amid the era's style wars. Held's thickly painted hard-edge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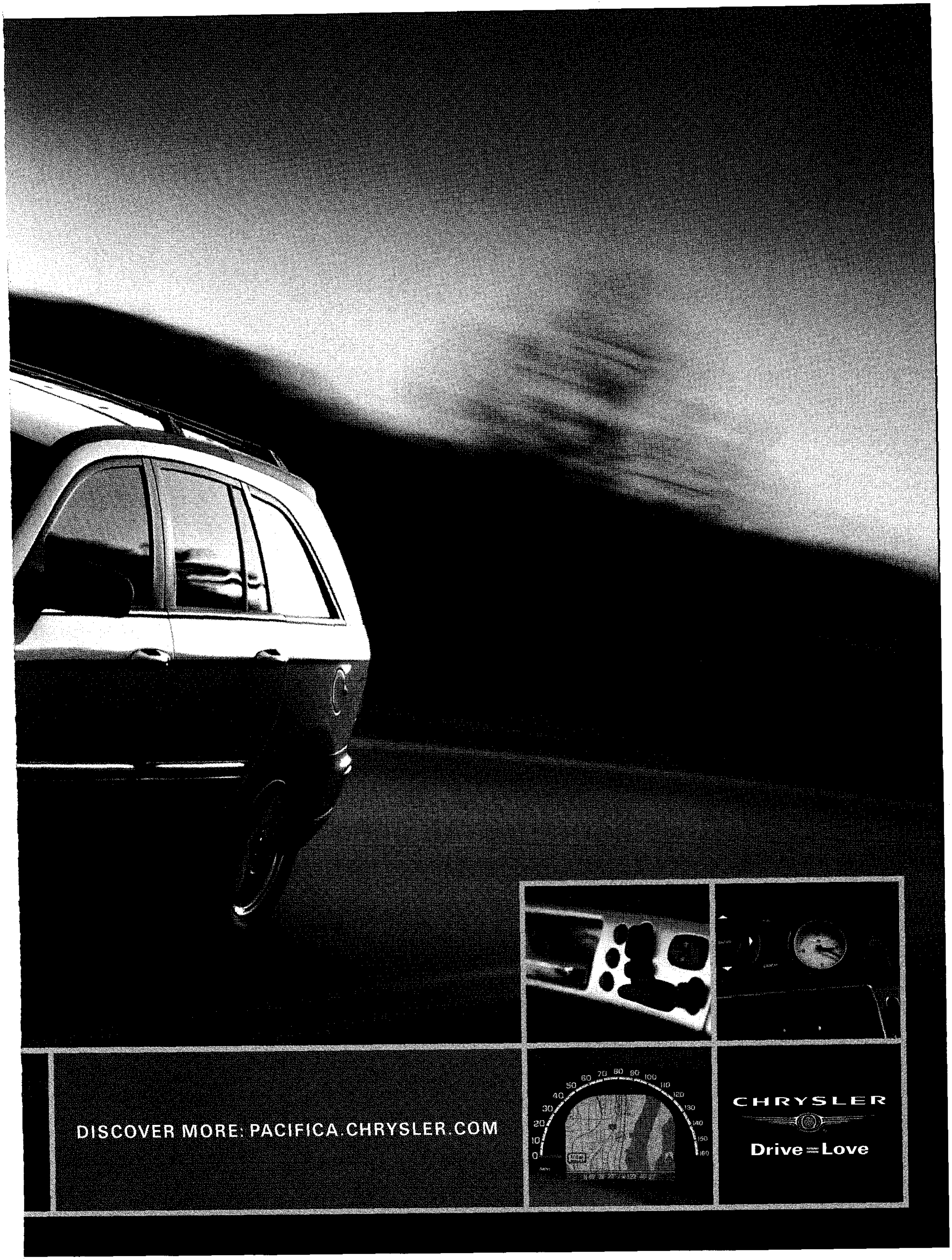

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Drive = Love

abstractions suggest Abstract Expressionism with Pop colors and minimalist presence. Their nubbly surfaces smolder with poetic authority. Two rough-hewn, brightly painted wood sculptures and a relief by Sugarman are jazzy, like three-dimensionalized Stuart Davis, and spankingly matter-of-fact. Back then, Held and Sugarman realized smart, big-city poignance in sophisticated styles, like Bobby Short at the Carlyle. Through Jan. 25. (Washburn, 20 W. 57th St. 397-6780.)

Short List

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE
Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 977-7160.
Through Jan. 4.
CY TWOMBLY
Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 517-8677.
Through Jan. 4.

GALLERIES–CHELSEA

CHUCK CLOSE
Strong new paintings and astounding daguerreotypes, all portraying family, friends, and art worldlings. Close has enlarged the quilted mini-abstractions of his optical grid; these paintings might resolve into realism if viewed from a quarter-mile away. One intuits a likeness while seeing just paint and marvelling at Close's higher mathematics of color. (A shadow by a mouth entails, in one square, cannily rationed green, blue, purple, brown, and orange.) The daguerreotypes—unique images in mercury emulsion on metal, shot with ferociously intense strobe flash—are photography as you've never seen it. With incredibly detailed textures in silvery depth, they serve up the sitters, body and soul. Through Jan. 11. (Pace Wildenstein, 534 W. 25th St. 421-3292.)

JEAN PAINLEVÉ
Jacques Cousteau meets Jean Cocteau in beguiling photographs and underwater films (transferred to video) taken in the twenties and thirties by the scientist son of a French prime minister. The films made a big splash with the Surrealists, and Dali's famous lobster phone from 1936 may have been inspired by a Painlevé crustacean photographed six years earlier and published by Georges Bataille in his journal *Documents*. The still images—a shrimp's nose, a stickleback's eggs—teeter on abstraction, suggesting a more glamorous Karl Blossfeldt. Through Jan. 11. (Cristinerose, 529 W. 20th St. 206-0297.)

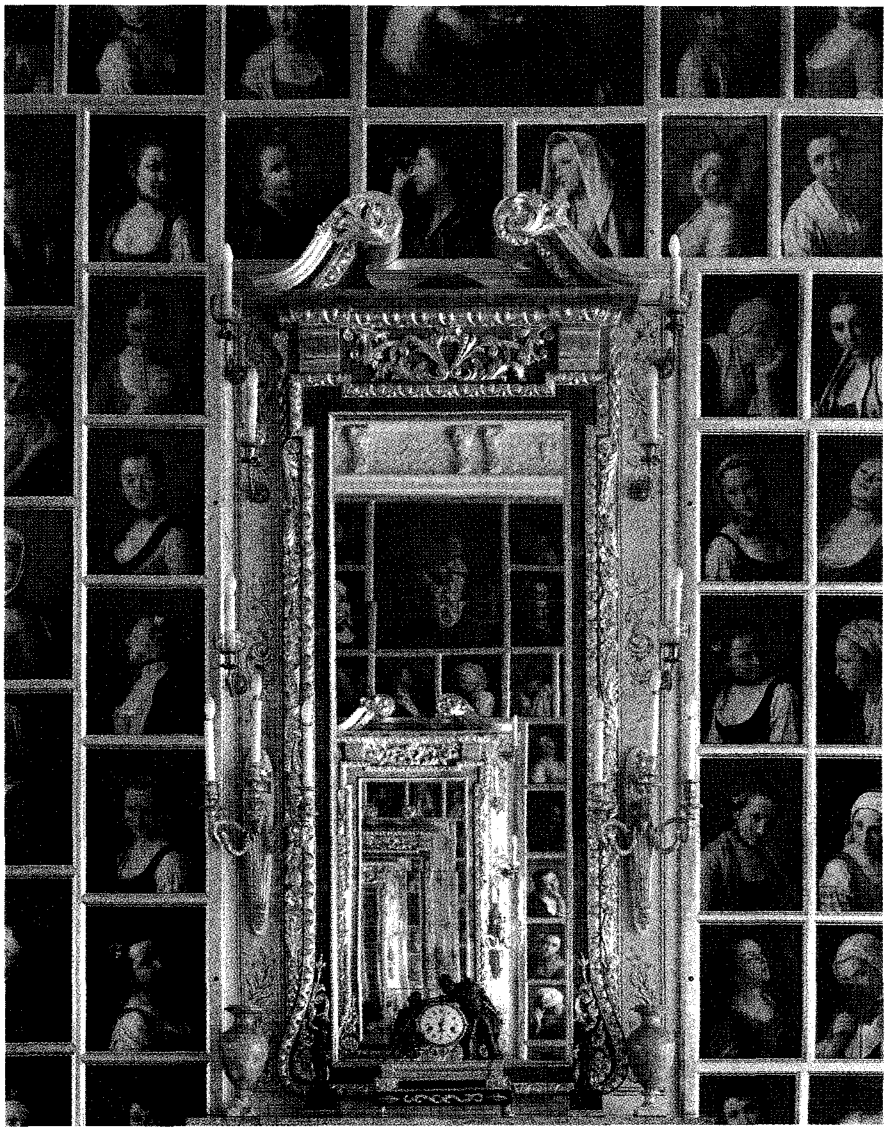
MONIQUE PRIETO
Not much has changed since Prieto's last New York show four years ago. She still composes on a Macintosh and then renders her artfully clutzy shape arrangements on big, bare canvases. The shapes themselves are less cartoony, more deckle-edged and brittle than their predecessors. They might be torn versions of Ellsworth Kellys, or animated flint tools. A few paintings of paired Prieto-morphs suggest couples nuzzling or nudging each other—as if they were color-field versions of mistletoe moments. Are they too anthropomorphic, too sweet-tempered? Maybe, but Prieto's formal reserve implies that sentimentality is in the eye of the beholder. Through Jan. 4. (Cheim and Read, 547 W. 25th St. 242-7727.)

Short List

YAYOI KUSAMA
Robert Miller, 524 W. 26th St. 366-4774.
Through Jan. 25.
ERWIN REDL
Riva, 529 W. 20th St. 242-3434. Through Jan. 7.
TOM SACHS
Bohen Foundation, 415 W. 13th St. 414-4575.
Through spring.

GALLERIES–DOWNTOWN

PETER SORIANO
The mischievous polychrome sculptures cast from polyester resin suggest a line of tools designed by Arp for Gumby (despite their rigid material, the brightly colored biomorphic forms seem pliable). Most of the objects come outfitted with built-in handles, and the most elaborate installation comes with its own nylon straps and moving blanket. One semi-translucent blob the color of chewed bubble gum sprouts red nodules that look as if they were squeezed between the artist's fingers before being cast, like a mud-pie version of Rodin's hands. Through Jan. 25. (Lennon Weinberg, 560 Broadway. 941-0012.)



"Rotari's Gallery, Peterhof, 2000" by Andrew Moore, at Richardson.

Short List

DAVID HAMMONS
Ace, 275 Hudson St. 255-5599.
Through Feb. 1.
LISA RUYTER
Koenig, 249 Centre St. 334-9255.
Through Jan. 4.

PHOTOGRAPHY

WALKER EVANS
Some of Evans's most revered and widely reproduced images of Depression-era sharecroppers and their wretched world pop up among these thirty-six duplicates from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. The iconic cross of light penetrating the doors of the haunted breakfast room of the Bell Grove Plantation is just as sinister as always; the renowned pathos of the barefoot boy in "Coal Miner's House, Scott's Run, West Virginia" is as ironic as ever. But right next to the acclaimed portrait of James Agee hang two less-exhibited profiles that show the writer even sadder and more isolated in his thoughts than usual. The seldom seen "Waterfront Poolroom, New York" oozes an ominous filth from stinking sidewalk to corroded awning. Yet the liquid blacks of this American ruin glow with the beauty of an Ashcan-school daguerreotype. Through Jan. 18. (Pace MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 759-7999.)

SANDI FELLMAN
These highly magnified closeups of butterflies, bugs, and their glyph-like shadows merge scientific precision with pure abstraction. Packed with hints of hidden meaning, each of these sepia-toned images threatens to induce hours of metaphysical musing. When Fellman sets her sights on the humble daddy longlegs, the intricate pattern between dense, pulsing body and shimmering legs seems proof of some powerful mathematical theorem. Her dynamic butterfly profile possesses a startling, visceral glory, but its areas of obscurity and darkness remain a mystery no matter how close you might get to the frame. Through Jan. 4. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 750-7070.)

ANDREW MOORE
Soviet Communism may now be a thing of the past, but the aesthetic associated with it—grim, towering blocks of gray apartment buildings, desolate landscapes with palettes of scabby greens and browns—persists in the West's visual imagination. Moore, whose previous show of Havana interiors

was so colorful and buoyant that it made Communism seem like a great thing (from an aesthetic standpoint at least) ventures beyond the expected representations of Russia to give us images of giddy beauty and majesty. In "Rotari's Gallery, Peterhof, 2000" a tall mirror, edged with baroque gold curlicues, is flanked by portraits of ivory-skinned Russian beauties; the room positively froths with Romanovian excess. The landscapes—with their elegant, unpeopled silence—will remind viewers of Candida Hofer's perfect interiors. In taking Russia—its contradictions and gorgeous ruins—at face value, he captures a country's diversity and history in a mere nine images. Through Jan. 25. (Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610.)

Short List

DAN ESTABROOK
Morthland, 511 W. 25th St. 242-7767.
Through Jan. 11.
NICK HOOKER
Briggs Robinson, 527 W. 29th St. 560-9075.
Through Jan. 11.
GABRIEL OROZCO
Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 977-7160.
Through Jan. 4.
RYAN WEIDEMAN
Bruce Silverstein, 504 W. 22nd St. 627-3930.
Through Jan. 5.
"WEEGEE'S TRICK PHOTOGRAPHY"
International Center of Photography, 1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. 857-0000. Through Feb. 16.

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Franco Zeffirelli's production of **"Don Giovanni,"** with a cast that includes Barbara Frittoli, Carol Vaness, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Michael Schade, Richard Bernstein, and Eric Halfvarson; Sylvain Cambreling conducts. (Jan. 1 at 7:30 and Jan. 4 at 8.) ♦ It's hard to believe that Zeffirelli's production of **"Carmen"** is a product of the mid-nineties; its elaborate but tacky décor, complemented by preening toreadors and charming peasants, would seem to date from the heady days when "Man of La Mancha" was just the thing. But it's an effective showcase for Denyce Graves, whose lusty, dead-on portrayal of the title role has become her signal contribution to opera; her new Don José, the stentorian tenor Neil Shicoff, should add some genuine passion to the proceedings. Also with Mary Dunleavy (as Micaëla) and Ludovic Tézier (a stylish if slightly underpowered Escamillo); Yves Abel conducts, keeping the music light and crisp. (Jan. 2 at 7:30 and Jan. 6 at 8.) ♦ Strauss's **"Die Fledermaus,"** with Cynthia Lawrence, Lyubov Petrova, Victoria Livengood, Louis Otey, and Francisco Casanova; Philippe Jordan. (Jan. 3 at 8.) ♦ With Solveig Kringelborn, Rosemary Joshua, Jennifer Larmore, David Kuebler, and Paul Charles Clarke. (Jan. 7 at 7:30.) ♦ It says a lot for John Dexter's 1977 production of **"Dialogues des Carmélites"** that its meagre accoutrements (a cross-shaped wooden platform, a few bunches of aluminum tubing brought down from the flies) are but the shell of a daring conception that lets the central issues of Poulenc's unabashedly neo-Romantic opera—life and death, faith and doubt—come bracingly to the fore. Dexter's unsentimental approach (revived here by the stage director David Kneuss) is perfect for the opera, which concerns a group of Carmelite nuns destined for the guillotine in the last bloody days of the French Revolution; it's of a piece with the conducting of James Conlon, who shapes the score with crackling energy and forward drive. In the leading role of Blanche de la Force, Patricia Racette's strong vocalism makes us keenly aware of the young nun's spiritual crisis, though not, perhaps, of her crippling vulnerability. But the production largely benefits from a cast that is light on superstars and big on ensemble players who know their place in the whole. The rich-voiced mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, hardly an agile figure onstage, gradually grows into a commanding presence as the

BOOK CURRENTS
Rappers' Delights

Hip-hop rose from the streets of the Bronx, offering relief from the crime and poverty of the mid-nineteen-seventies. **YES YES Y'ALL: THE EXPERIENCE MUSIC PROJECT ORAL HISTORY OF HIP-HOP'S FIRST DECADE** (Da Capo), by Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, captures those early days of battling, breaking, and tagging, when d.j.s like Afrika Bambaataa threw down beats for the b-boys on the floor. "Little did anybody know that this thing was going to turn into a world-wide phenomenon, billion-dollar business and all that," says one of the forefathers of hip-hop, Kool DJ Herc.

In **GUNSHOTS IN MY COOK-UP** (Atria), Selwyn Seyfu Hinds tracks his own journey from hip-hop fan to hip-hop luminary. In essays that range from paeans to Lauryn Hill to an account of Hinds's tenure as the editor-in-chief at *The Source*, he grapples with what it means to stay true to the ethos of rap. "The streets are the people and places from which an MC springs. The streets birth you. Certify and validate you . . . They can also kill you," he writes.

Sometimes keeping it real means making it up. In Percival Everett's satirical novel **ERASURE** (Hyperion), Thelonious (Monk) Ellison, an academic with a penchant for Latin, sets out to write a satire of black literature—an amalgamation of "Native Son," gangsta rap, and trashy talk shows; to his dismay, the book is acclaimed for its authenticity. Contemplating its success after the obscurity of his other books (including a retelling of Aeschylus' "The Persians"), Ellison notes, "I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression."

—*Andrea Thompson*

RICHARD MC GUIRE

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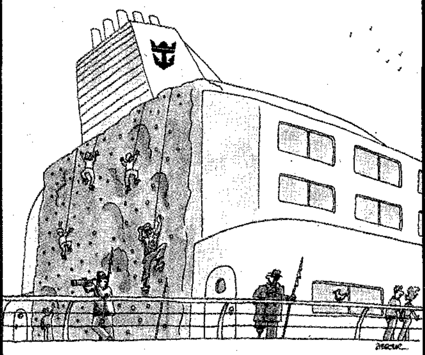

"Give me a shout if either of you catch sight of the white whale, boys. I'm going below to check out the ice skating."

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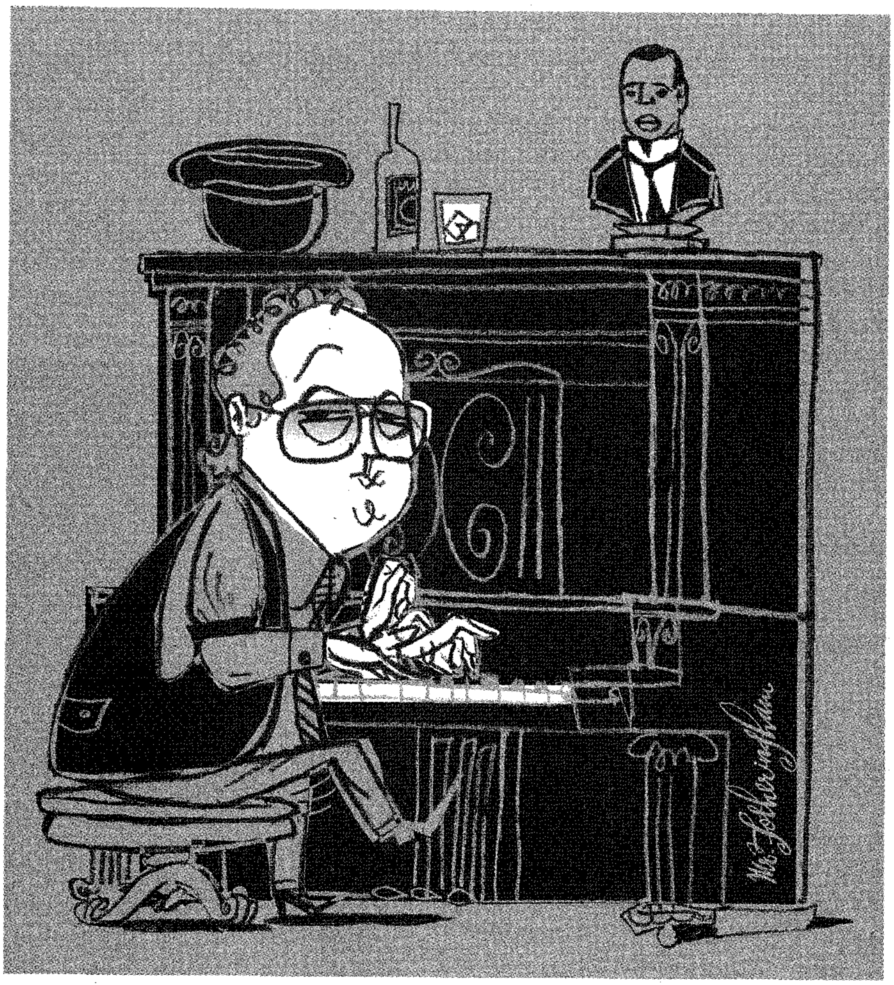
grim subprioress, Mother Marie, and Heidi Grant Murphy, a light soprano of sophisticated musicality, handles the potentially cloying role of Sister Constance with an honesty that makes the final scene almost unbearably real. But the top laurels go to the British mezzo Felicity Palmer, as the Old Prioress, who maintains a steely vocal poise while her character undergoes the most agonizing death scene in all of opera. (Jan. 4 at 1:30. This is the final performance.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

AMATO OPERA
The feisty little East Village company presents its final performances of Rossini's **"Barber of Seville."** (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 228-8200. Jan. 3-4 at 7:30 and Jan. 5 at 2:30.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
William Bolcom's vast knowledge of American popular song gives his operatic version of Arthur Miller's "A View from the Bridge" the ring of authenticity. Long before he embarked on his opera career, Bolcom was a pioneer in the ragtime revival of the nineteen-seventies (his piano rag "Graceful Ghost" is good enough to stand up to the best of Scott Joplin), and his affection for that music sparkles through "Ragomania," a "classical overture for orchestra" commissioned by the Boston Pops as a testament to Eubie Blake (a good friend of Bolcom's) and to the memory of George Gershwin. Lorin Maazel conducts the first Philharmonic performances of the work, on a program that also includes the Grieg Piano Concerto (with Leif Ove Andsnes, the composer's leading champion) and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. (Avery Fisher Hall. 875-5656. Jan. 2 and Jan. 7 at 7:30 and Jan. 3 at 11 A.M.)



The Philharmonic plays William Bolcom's "Ragomania," beginning January 2.

EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM

"SALUTE TO VIENNA"
A cavalcade of kitsch for New Year's Day, featuring waltzes, polkas, and operetta arias (by Kálmán, Lehár, and Johann Strauss II) performed by the tenor Jerry Hadley, the soprano Milena Rudiferia, members of the Hungarian National Ballet, and the Strauss Symphony of America, conducted by Christian Schulz. (Avery Fisher Hall. 721-6500. Jan. 1 at 2:30.)

RECITALS

A PASSING FANCIE: "A NEW YEAR'S GIFT"
A new consort of viols makes its Gotham début with a New Year's program of Holborne, Bach (selections from "The Art of Fugue," and the Prelude and Fugue BWV 867), Purcell, Lawes (two of the intricate and lustrous Consort Sets in Five Parts), and the contemporary English composer Freda Burford ("The Turn of the Year"). (Christ Church, 326 Clinton St., at Kane St., Brooklyn. Jan. 1 at 3. No tickets required.)

ARTEK: THE FOUR SEASONS
Midtown's hardest-working early-music band presents Vivaldi's ubiquitous concertos anew—on original instruments, and on an intimate scale. Robert Mealy is the violin soloist; Gwendolyn Toth is at the harpsichord. (St. Francis of Assisi Church, 135 W. 31st St. Jan. 2 at 1:15. No tickets required.)

BARGEMUSIC
Olga Bloom's doughty chamber-music collective starts off the New Year soundly with two programs of Beethoven's Opus 18 string quartets, performed by a group that includes the violinist Mark Peskanov and the cellist Mark Kosower. Jan. 2-3 at 7:30: Quartets Nos. 1-3 (in F Major, G Major, and D Major). ♦ Jan. 4 at 7:30 and Jan. 5 at 4: Quartets Nos. 4-6 (in C Minor, A Major, and B-Flat Major). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

SUNDAYS ON THE ISLAND
The Russian pianist Tamara Kurdadze, a new addition to the Sundays roster, offers a brunchtime recital of Beethoven (the "Tempest" Sonata), Bach, Chopin, and other composers. The setting is Le Refuge Inn, a charming French-style bed-and-breakfast nestled amid the yacht slips of City Island. A reception follows. (620 City Island Ave., the Bronx. For information about tickets, call 212-927-9194. Jan. 5 at 12:30.)

ROLF SCHULTE AND SOPHIE SHAO
The violinist, a distinguished veteran of the city's new-music scene, and the young American cellist collaborate with the pianist and composer Richard Wilson in music by Beethoven, Debussy (the Sonata for Violin and Piano), and Wilson (Music for Violin and Cello and the world première of his Piano Trio). (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 501-3330. Jan. 5 at 3.)

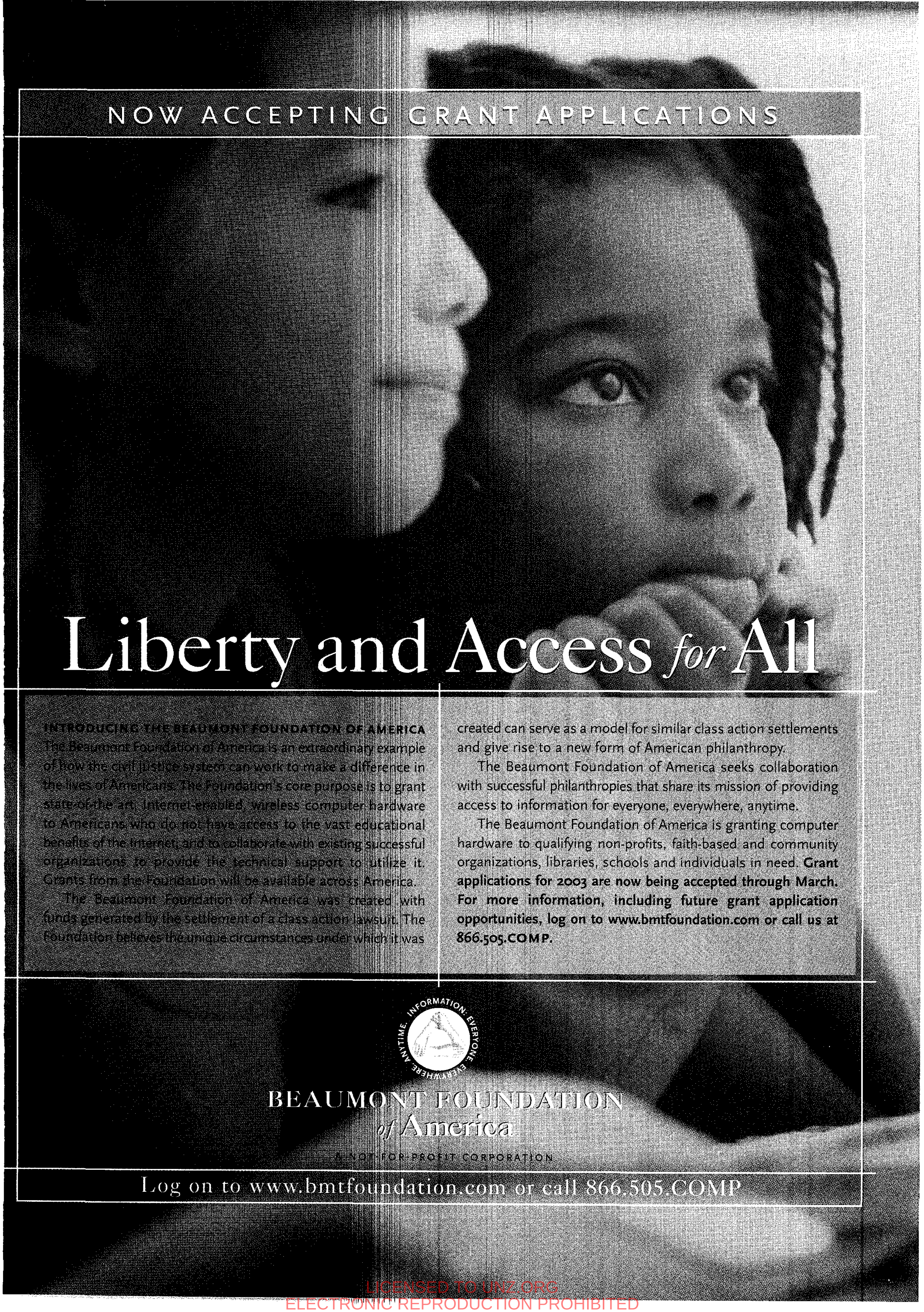
JUPITER SYMPHONY CHAMBER PLAYERS
Part of the late Jens Nygaard's genius was his magnetic ability to attract special guest artists to drop by and contribute to his concerts—at no fee. Now all the musicians get paid, but the spirit of the tradition continues. Whitney Crockett, the co-principal bassoonist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra (along with a colleague, the Met hornist Javier Gándara), joins the strings and winds of the ensemble for a program featuring music by Mozart (a suite from "The Abduction from the Seraglio") and Dvořák (the bumptious Serenade, Op. 44). (Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church, 152 W. 66th St. 799-1259. Jan. 6 at 2 and 8.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

FIRST SATURDAY
The January installment of this monthly series at the Brooklyn Museum of Art presents an opportunity for the folks who recently resolved to try new things to make good on their word, especially if their resolutions included the promise to make a hat out of foam and wire or to learn to waltz. The American Magic-Lantern Theatre will be on hand to re-create a Victorian New Year's celebration, for those who have never seen one. And anyone who wants to attend a gallery talk or a feminist's one-woman show can check in on Larissa Bailiff as she discusses the Victorian nude, or the spoken-word artist Sarah Jones. The evening concludes with a concert by the Vienna Festival Orchestra and the chance to display your new hat and fancy dance steps. (Eastern Parkway. 718-638-5000. Jan. 4 from 6:30 to 11.)

READINGS
Jan. 1, from noon to nine: Bob Holman, Bingo Gazingo, Susan Sherman, and more than a hundred other independent spirits gather for "Boiling Point, the Alternative New Year's Day Spoken Word/Performance Extravaganza." (Knitting Factory, 74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. 219-3006.) ♦ Jan. 1, starting at 2: Patti Smith, Richard Hell, Emily XYZ, and a slew of other musicians and dancers congregate for the twenty-ninth annual marathon reading at the Poetry Project. (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. Tickets at the door.) ♦ Jan. 4 at 2: The Cuban novelist Antonio Benítez-Rojo reads from his work as part of the Caribbean Author Series at the Brooklyn Public Library. (Central Library, Grand Army Plaza. 718-230-2100.) ♦ Jan. 6 at 8:15: The poets Simon Ortiz and N. Scott Momaday read from their works-in-progress. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 415-5500.)

TALKS
Jan. 5 at 3: Kathryn Calley Galitz, a research associate at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, discusses the nineteenth-century French painter Théodore Chassériau. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 879-5500.) ♦ Jan. 7 at 8:15: Art Buchwald talks about being a professional humorist and reads from his latest book of essays, "We'll Laugh Again." (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 415-5500.)



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MOVIES OPENING

RIVERS AND TIDES: ANDY GOLDSWORTHY WORKING WITH TIME
A documentary about the British earthworks artist, directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer. Opening Jan. 2. (Film Forum.)

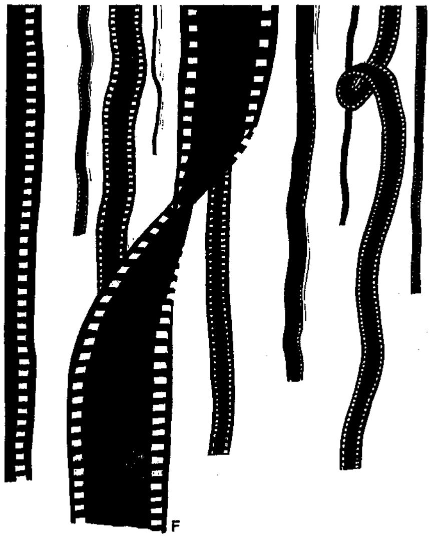
FILM NOTES

ABOUT SCHMIDT
Alexander Payne's last movie, "Election," was unpleasant, timely, and as sharp as a nib. His new movie is unpleasant, indecisive, and about as cheering as a damp fog. Jack Nicholson plays the eponymous Schmidt, who leaves a long career in insurance and slumps into graceless retirement. His wife (June Squibb) dies, whereupon his daughter (Hope Davis) takes over the household; soon enough, the aging male is left alone, and we are left to ponder the mismatch—unresolved by Payne—between Schmidt the early fusspot and Schmidt the emerging slob, with a riot of used food packaging at his feet. After that, the movie takes to the road, like a late, soft aftermath to "Five Easy Pieces." But the Nicholson of that film made hard choices; here he plays to the viewers' cultish worship of Jack the Lad, and even the saddest scenes have flourishes of rumpled clowning. A picture that aimed to celebrate a regular guy winds up endorsing his comic disdain for the stale lives around him. With Dermot Mulroney, Kathy Bates, and a hot tub that has seen it all.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/16/02.) (Lincoln Square and Union Square.)

ADAPTATION
The hero of the new experimental comedy by the writer Charlie Kaufman and the director Spike Jonze ("Being John Malkovich") is Kaufman himself, played by Nicolas Cage. He's in a dreadful quandary, having signed on to adapt Susan Orlean's "The Orchid Thief," which grew out of a 1995 article in this magazine. "Great sprawling *New Yorker* stuff," Charlie calls the book, by which he means it's a screenwriter's nightmare—ruminative, descriptive, but lacking the clear kind of "arc" that can be shovelled into a movie. Cage's Charlie, a malcontent who wears a flannel shirt in Los Angeles, works himself into a fury of self-loathing, and, for about an hour, the movie is a funny, deft metafiction that jumps back and forth among Charlie's feverish self-doubts, his erotic fantasies, and the story he is attempting to write. We see that story: Orlean (Meryl Streep) tags along with John Laroche (Chris Cooper), a Florida man who was arrested while stealing a rare form of orchid from a state wilderness preserve. Unsocialized but erudite, a moralist, a theorist, a swamp-bred crank, Laroche fascinates the melancholy Orlean, who feels her life lacks a consuming passion. The performances are all expert, especially Cooper's, but the movie takes a disastrous leap into melodrama at the end, which can be interpreted as either a sellout to Hollywood convention or a savage self-parody of selling out. Either way, it's a mistake.—*David Denby* (12/9/02) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinema, Empire 25, Lincoln Square, and Sunshine Cinema.)

CABARET
A great movie musical. In a prodigious balancing act, the choreographer-director Bob Fosse keeps the period—Berlin, 1931—at a cool distance. We see the decadence as garish and sleazy; yet we also see the animal energy in it—everything seems to become sexualized. The movie does not exploit decadence; rather, it gives it its due. With Joel Grey as our devil-doll host and Liza Minnelli (in her first singing role on the screen) as exuberant, corruptible Sally Bowles, chasing after the life of a headliner no matter what. Minnelli had such gaiety and electricity in this 1972 movie that she became a star before our eyes.—*Pauline Kael* (Moving Image; Jan. 4.)

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN
Leonardo DiCaprio is loose and easy—a movie star again after his grim encounter with "Gangs of New York"—in Steven Spielberg's charming comedy about a teen-age con man. When his businessman/scam-artist father (Christopher Walken) loses his grip, Frank W. Abagnale (DiCaprio), eager to restore the old guy's glory, slips into deception as a way of life, impersonating, serially, an airline pilot, a doctor, and a lawyer, kiting checks along the way and leading the F.B.I., in the person of Agent Hanratty (Tom Hanks), on a merry chase. Yet Hanratty, while pursuing Frank with Javert-like relentlessness, becomes fond of the young scoundrel. The movie is really about an amoral boy lucky enough to have two fathers, each with superb qualities. This real-life story (based on Abagnale's autobiography) is set in the sixties, and Spielberg has given it a sleek and carefree look. An expert and touching entertainment.—*D.D.* (12/23 & 30/02) (Battery Park 16, Cinema 1, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)



CHICAGO
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Ziegfeld)

CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND
Just as audiences are recovering from the multilayered madness of "Adaptation," here comes another Charlie Kaufman script. George Clooney directed, but this project is pure Kaufman: fact and fiction tossed in the blender together, with plenty of formal trickery. The story, or more precisely, the leaping-off point, is the autobiography of Chuck Barris, the producer who invented "The Dating Game," "The Newlywed Game," and "The Gong Show," which he also hosted. Then, there is this small matter of political assassinations: Barris claimed to be a C.I.A. hit man, tapped for various "wet" operations throughout his television career. Sam Rockwell plays Barris as a carnal, slightly crazed man who's also deeply insecure that he'll be remembered as a purveyor of trash. Is this what tipped him into his fantasy life? This nimble and free-spirited film doesn't say; it continually shifts perspective and plays with the mystery. In the end, it's a story of wayward ambition and an object lesson in what people will do when placed in front of a television camera. With Drew Barrymore and Julia Roberts, as the duelling women in Barris's life, and interviews with Dick Clark and other colleagues.—*Michael Agger* (Union Square.)

FAR FROM HEAVEN
An immaculate new movie from Todd Haynes, the purveyor of "Safe" and "Velvet Goldmine." This project teams him once again with Julianne Moore, who looks set to become the Catherine Deneuve to Haynes's Buñuel. Here she plays—or incarnates, to the last inch of her hemline—a wife and mother, living in Hartford in 1957. All is well, if brittle, until she drops by to see her husband (Dennis Quaid) in his office after hours, and finds him entwined with a man. From here on, their lives start to shred and scatter; she herself falls for the gardener (Dennis Haysbert), who is not only black but, to all appearances, perfect. With tact and care, the movie digs into all the subjects that lay concealed below the surface when Max Ophuls and Douglas Sirk were filming their own melodramas in the nineteen-fifties. As an exercise in style, it cannot be faulted, and Moore takes us by surprise, even by storm, with the wealth and fullness of her feeling; yet there remains something prim in the whole endeavor—we know better than these beleaguered people did, and the movie can hardly help congratulating us, and itself, on that knowledge.—*A.L.* (11/18/02) (Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinemas, East 85th Street, Kew Gardens Cinema, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and 72nd Street East.)

GANGS OF NEW YORK
Daniel Day-Lewis, returning to movies after a spell of shoemaking in Florence, disports himself with royal assurance as the voluble thug William Cutting (Bill the Butcher) in Martin Scorsese's generally unsuccessful epic about nineteenth-century gang life in New York. Wielding knife and cleaver, this vengeful brawler makes spectacles of blood that he knows are gratifying to others. He's a self-amused monster, and Day-Lewis does what he can to give this semi-coherent production some theatrical panache. Scorsese and his screenwriters (Jay Cocks, Steven Zaillian, and Kenneth Lonergan) never succeed in linking together the intimate personal dramas and the endless gang war between the nativist Yankees (i.e., Protestants) and the new waves of Irish immigrants. The movie isn't boring, but it's heavy-spirited, obvious, and grisly, with an emphasis on knives and blood that borders on the fetishistic. Scorsese shot "Gangs" in Rome's Cinecittà, and the picture has some of the depressive feverishness of "Fellini Satyricon," which was also shot there—the jeering spectators mounted in multitiered sets, the furtive life of the crime-ridden metropolis, with its hapless poverty, its barbaric entertainments, its obscure and unredeemed suffering. The movie also stars a sullen, stolid Leonardo DiCaprio as a young Irish immigrant eager to avenge the death of his father, Cameron Diaz as a prostitute and pickpocket, Liam Neeson as a fallen Irish leader, and Jim Broadbent as the corrupt political boss William Tweed.—*D.D.* (12/23 & 30/02) (Battery Park 16, Cinema 1, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)

GOING MY WAY
It's often lumped together with banal Academy Award winners like "The Greatest Show on Earth," but this easygoing, frankly sentimental tale from 1944 was a very personal movie for the producer-director Leo McCarey. He based the character of Father Fitzgibbon, the leader of a debt-ridden Manhattan parish, on an actual Santa Monica priest. Thanks to the genius of Barry Fitzgerald in the role, McCarey emerged with an indelible portrait of a sly, stubborn, endearing, and infuriating old man facing his own obsolescence. Matching Fitzgerald with Bing Crosby, as the trouble-shooting priest who saves the parish, keeps the movie from turning prematurely lachrymose—Crosby's instinctive amiability, crack timing, and soft touch give "crowd-pleasing" a good name. "He could do no wrong as an actor," said McCarey. The movie did win seven Oscars, including best picture, director, actor (Crosby), supporting actor (Fitzgerald), and song—"Swinging on a Star."—*Michael Sragow* (Walter Reade Theatre; Jan. 5.)

THE HOURS
It has to overcome an over-all morbidity, a fractured time sequence, and Philip Glass's intrusive, chiming score, and, amazingly, it does. Stephen Daldry directed this adaptation of Michael Cunningham's prize-winning 1998 novel, from a script by David Hare. They've fashioned a lovely, serious work—as good as any recent "literary" movie—devoted to two themes, the variety of human bonds, especially the bond of love, and the gift that the dying make to the living. Nicole Kidman gives a revelatory performance as Virginia Woolf, both in 1923, at the time of writing "Mrs. Dalloway," and in 1941, when she loaded her coat with stones and walked into a river. Julianne Moore is a depressed Los Angeles housewife in 1951, and Meryl Streep

plays a contemporary New York literary editor who hopes to give a party for a poet friend (Ed Harris) dying of AIDS. The widely separated episodes fit together as surely and lightly as dancers in a Balanchine ballet.—*D.D.* (12/23 & 30/02) (Lincoln Square, 72nd Street East, and Union Square.)

IKIRU

Akira Kurosawa has too long been pegged as an artist of action and a maker of epics. The restoration of his 1952 picture, known in English as "To Live," should revive his reputation as a director who was not merely a movie master but also a virtuoso humanist. Here he uses multiple film and narrative techniques to dramatize, without tears, the plight of a dying city-government bureaucrat who looks for shreds of meaning in his family and profession. Kurosawa achieves the piercing emotions and poetry of the Italian neorealists by opposite means: he doesn't make the camera disappear. Instead, from the first view of the hero's X-rays, he deploys his camera so sharply and unerringly that it seems to take X-rays of the spirit. In Takashi Shimura, Kurosawa found an actor who could stand up to this close inspection. The crowning image of Shimura on a swing in a city park, crooning a song about life's brevity as the snow falls, comes as close as any big-screen moment to Joycean epiphany. In Japanese.—*M.S.* (Film Forum; Jan. 3-7.)

**THE LORD OF THE RINGS:
THE TWO TOWERS**

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Astor Plaza, Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Twin, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

MAID IN MANHATTAN

Jennifer Lopez once showed great promise as an actress: her early roles in "Selena" and particularly "Out of Sight" displayed a tough, sexy charisma. In this would-be romantic comedy she plays a New York hotel maid who's mistaken for a wealthy guest and pursued by a Senate candidate, played, rather grudgingly, by Ralph Fiennes. The director Wayne Wang photographs the city as though it were all one big luxury apartment—everything is shiny and well scrubbed—but there's no silkiness in the wooden pairing of Lopez and Fiennes. At this point in Lopez's determined pursuit of fame, she carries a lot of baggage. The recording career, the clothing line, the celebrity dating have made her a diva, but in wanting so desperately to be all things to all people, she's also a model of mediocrity.—*Bruce Diones* (Chelsea Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

MORVERN CALLAR

Samantha Morton plays the title character in Lynne Ramsay's dark and sensuous portrait of a young Scottish woman who, after her boyfriend's suicide, embarks on an existential journey, as mesmerizing and baffling to her as it is to the audience. As she travels from a dead-end job to a European holiday (accompanied by her best friend, played with party-animal enthusiasm by Kathleen McDermott), the movie's slow narrative tempo begins to entrance. Morton's performance, easily her best, is charismatically impassive. There's a gorgeous strangeness to Ramsay's movie, a distinctive and alluring visual language, and a sound design that keeps the dialogue to a minimum—the film feels like it's floating in ether.—*B.D.* (Cinema Village.)

RABBIT-PROOF FENCE

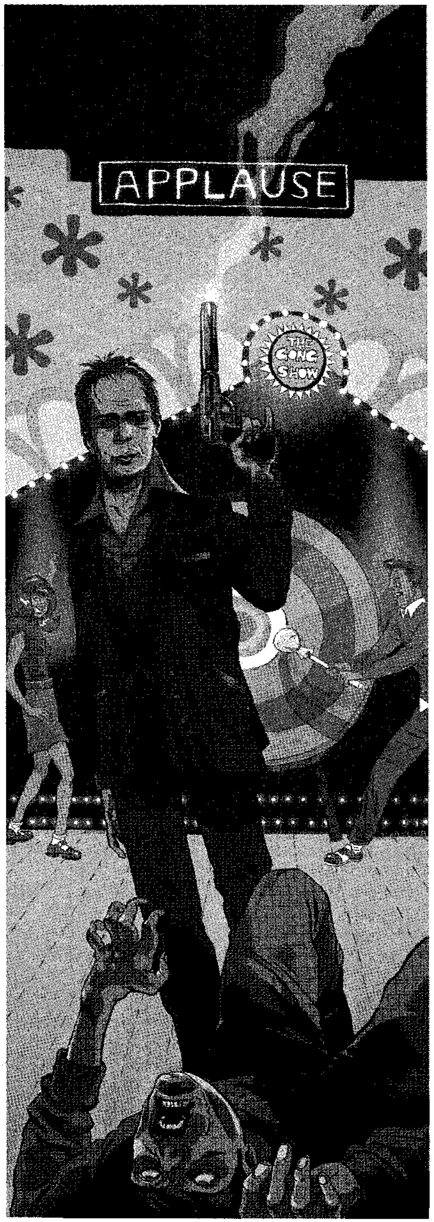
In 1931, three Aboriginal girls fled a state-run native settlement in Western Australia and walked more than twelve hundred miles to their home village. The director Phillip Noyce presents their journey in a straightforward way, giving patient attention to the desolate landscape and the almost wordless resolve of the girls. The movie only hints at the cruelties inflicted on the Aborigines, but the hints are enough. A heartbreaking, elemental film.—*M.A.* (Paris and Sunshine Cinema.)

RUGGLES OF RED GAP

Charles Laughton starred in this justly honored 1935 version of the venerable comedy by Harry Leon Wilson. (There were two earlier versions—one in 1918, and one in 1923 with Edward Everett Horton—and a later version in 1950, called "Fancy Pants," with Bob Hope.) The Laughton film, directed in a calm, restrained style by Leo McCarey, is just about irresistible, even with its big scene—Laughton, an English valet in the Old West, reciting the Gettysburg address in a saloon, as the camera pans across the awed faces of the cowhands. It's a bit much, but it works like magic. The cast could hardly be better: Roland Young is the Englishman who loses the valet in a poker game, Mary Boland and Charlie Ruggles are the rich American couple who win him, and ZaSu Pitts is the widow the valet courts.—*P.K.* (Walter Reade Theatre; Jan. 3-4.)

RUSSIAN ARK

A guide to the treasures of the Hermitage, a rueful glance down the vistas of Russian history, or a show of technical prowess: take your pick. Alexander Sokurov, the creator of "Mother and Son," proves that his singular method—at once earthy and transcendent—is gaining strength and width. The new film unwinds in one take, lasting ninety-six minutes, and by some miracle we grow happily accustomed to its rhythm, like children held rapt by a bedtime story. The camera glides through galleries as if it were the eye of an invisible visitor; ahead is a black-coated stranger, who accosts passers-by and clucks tenderly, if critically, over the art. Sokurov has made not a documentary, however careful his inspection of painted surfaces, but a collection of small, sorrowful dramas—wait for the imperial children, or the blind woman caressing a marble sculpture. The effect is impenetrable, yet the film is blessed with clarity; maybe, if you spend that much time among Old Masters, they start to rub off on you. In Russian.—*A.L.* (12/16/02) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)



Sam Rockwell in "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind."

TOMER HANUKA

SOLARIS

Jeremy Davies, who played the cowardly soldier in "Saving Private Ryan," is the only enjoyable element in Steven Soderbergh's painful exercise in higher solemnity. Davies has foxy eyes and a dark silky beard, and he speaks in brief phrases propelled by the darting, angular movements of his hands. The Kabuki style of movement is so eccentrically hip that it cracks up an audience puzzled by the goings on in a spaceship whose crew members have been haunted by replicants of dead friends and lovers—replicants formed out of the crew members' memories. The dialogue, which Soderbergh wrote himself (the material comes from a novel by Stanislaw Lem and a Russian film version from 1972, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky), largely consists of rhetorical questions and sentence fragments, and the mood of frozen bewilderment is sustained by a color scheme of varying shades of blue and by electronic music that arrives in prolonged slabs, pinning your brain to the base of your skull. With George Clooney, Natascha McElhone, and Viola Davis.—*D.D.* (12/9/02) (Battery Park 16, Kips Bay Theatre, 62nd & Broadway, Union Square, Village East Cinemas, and Ziegfeld.)

STAR TREK NEMESIS

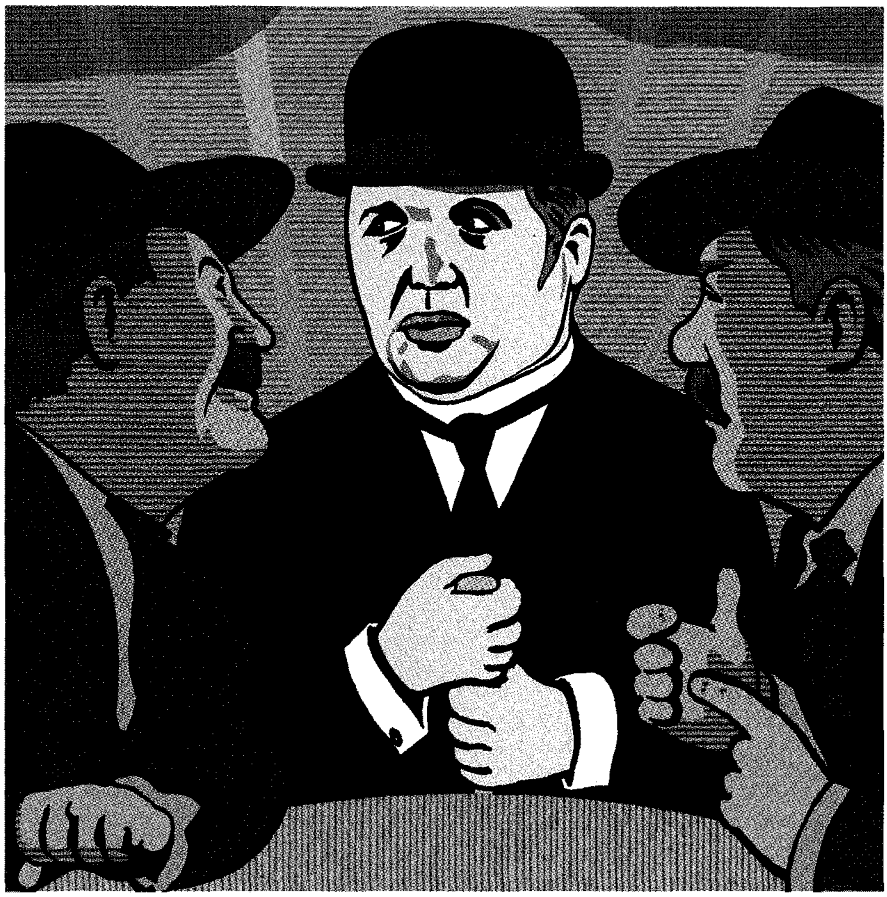
In Trek lore, the even-numbered films outshine the odd, and the rule holds for this movie, the tenth for the franchise. The movie sets Captain Picard (played knowingly by Patrick Stewart) and his "Next Generation" cast members on another enterprising voyage. This one involves an evil clone (developed by the Romulans from Picard's DNA) who is bent on destroying Earth. The movie was written by John Logan, the co-writer of "Gladiator" and an obvious Trek afficionado, who hits all the right notes, especially in the comradely relations among the crew. The action between Picard and his clone plays less well—Tom Hardy brings an effete ambiguity to the character, and he looks nothing like Stewart, which robs the movie of any doppelgänger tension. Still, the F/X department has done its duty by conjuring up some superior spaceship battles, and, in the end, the film, which genuflects often to the devotion of its television audience, makes for grand entertainment.—*B.D.* (First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)

TALK TO HER

In Pedro Almodóvar's odd but touching romantic drama, two very different men are drawn together by a common task: taking care of women who have fallen into a coma. Benigno (Javier Cámara), a shy, seemingly asexual young male nurse, looks after Alicia (Leonor Watling), a beautiful ballet dancer. Marco (Darío Grandinetti), a fortyish Argentine writer, becomes the lover of a fierce, long-waisted female bullfighter (Rosario Flores). After she is gored in the ring, she never speaks again. Both love affairs are touched by fantasy. Almodóvar's point appears to be that you can't have love without fable—that every love affair is an improbable narrative wrung from non-being and loneliness. The movie is shot in a new, subdued style for the director: past and present flow together, and everything seems touched with a melancholy magic. Two ballets by the choreographer Pina Bausch are integral to the film's themes. In Spanish.—*D.D.* (11/25/02) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Sunshine Cinema.)

25TH HOUR

The latest Spike Lee joint is a self-consciously post-9/11 movie, shot through with the melancholy spirit of aftermath. The opening credits use the Tribute in Light near Ground Zero to haunting effect, and the main character, played by Edward Norton, becomes a stand-in for the city itself. Lee's visual dexterity is without question, but the movie



At Walter Reade Theatre, "Ruggles of Red Gap," a 1935 Leo McCarey comedy.

MICHAEL KUPPERMAN

flounders under its dual purpose of delivering a dark valentine to the city and just telling its story. Norton plays a clean-living drug dealer on his way to jail for seven years: someone snitched on him, but he's not sure who. As Norton goes about his last day, Lee serves up whole subcultures of New York in fresh, fragrant slabs. We get the sports-profanity shorthand of the trading room, the urban playground with cigarette-smoking schoolgirls, the scratch artists presiding over the neon dance floors. The dialogue feels improvised, hyperverbal, and Lee gives the talented cast a chance to cut loose. Barry Pepper excels as an alpha broker, and Philip Seymour Hoffman is brilliant yet again as the kind of creepy sexual introvert he seems to specialize in. Anna Paquin has a particularly good moment as a Lolita recognizing her power. The movie doesn't succeed in a conventional suspenseful way, but it captures a mood.—*M.A.* (Empire 25, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)

ALSO PLAYING

ANTWONE FISHER
Beekman, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, and Empire 25.
ARARAT (11/18/02)
Angelika Film Center and Kew Gardens Cinema.
BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE (10/28/02)
BAM Rose Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, and Sunshine Cinema.
8 MILE (11/11/02)
Battery Park 16, 84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Union Square, and Village East Cinemas.
FRIDA (11/11/02)
Angelika Film Center, Battery Park 16, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and 19th Street East 6.
NARC
Empire 25, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.
NICHOLAS NICKLEBY
Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.
THE PIANIST
Lincoln Square.
TWO WEEKS NOTICE
Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Olympia I and II, 62nd & Broadway, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

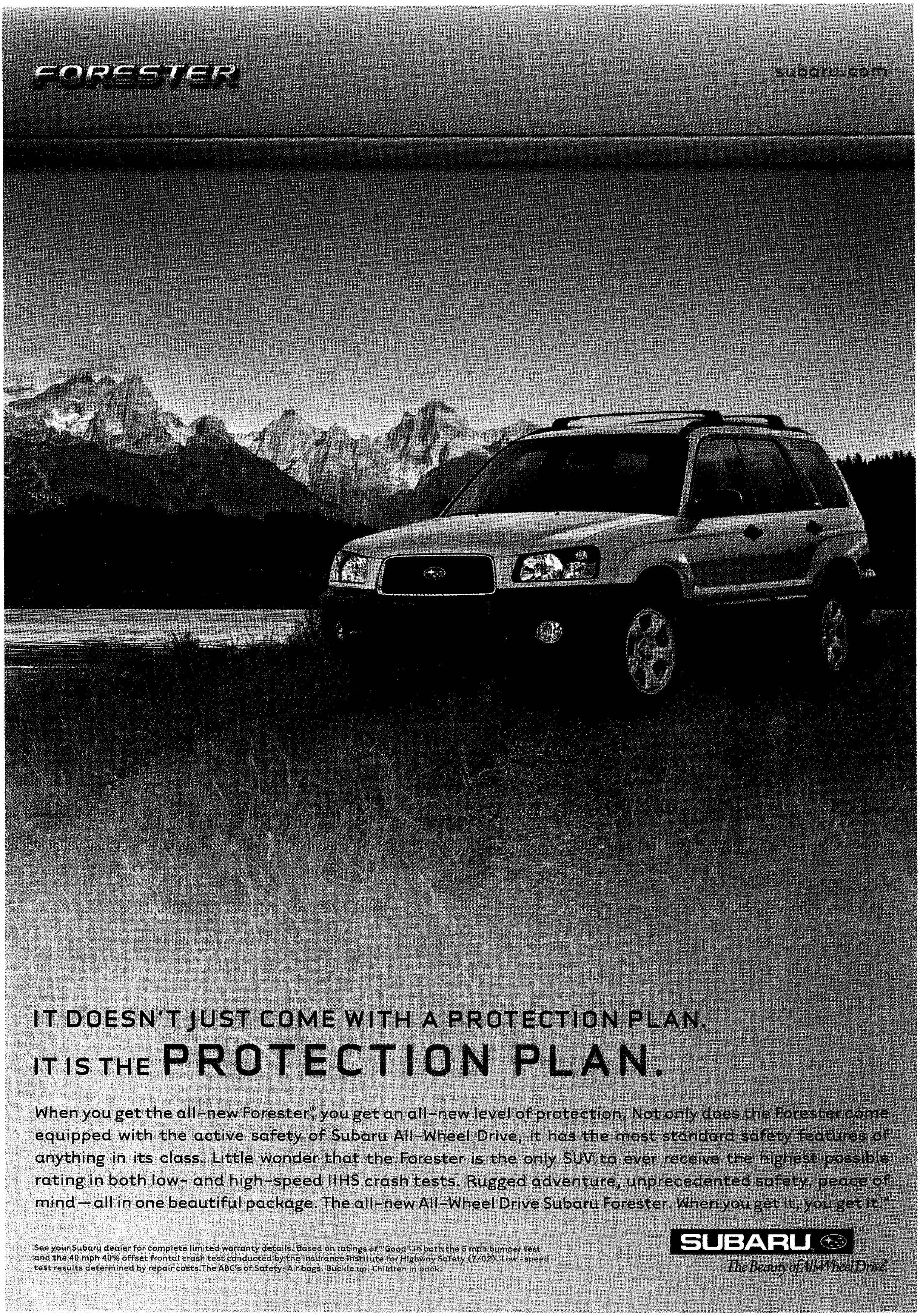
Unless noted, call 777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn.
Battery Park 16, West St. at Vesey St.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinemas 1, 2, and 3, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363).
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (398-3939).
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Kew Gardens Cinema, 81-05 Lefferts Blvd., Queens (718-441-9835).
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St. (757-2280).
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Twin, Broadway at 99th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
Sunshine Cinema, 139-143 E. Houston St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Jan. 4-5: "All That Jazz: The Films of Bob Fosse." Jan. 4 at 1:30: "Sweet Charity" (1969). ♦ Jan. 4 at 4: "Cabaret" (†). ♦ Jan. 4-5 at 6:30: "Lenny" (1974). ♦ Jan. 5 at 2: "All That Jazz" (1979). ♦ Jan. 5 at 4:30: "Star 80" (1983).
FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—Jan. 1-2 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "The Apartment" (1960, Billy Wilder). ♦ Jan. 3-7 at 1, 3:50, 6:50, and 9:25: "Ikiru" (†).
FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (355-6160)—Jan. 7 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Chronique d'un Été" (1960-61, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin; in French).
GRAMERCY THEATRE
127 E. 23rd St. (777-4900)—Through Jan. 30: "*Positif* Champions: Fifty Years of Cinema," a celebration of the French film monthly. Jan. 2 at 2: "Repulsion" (1965, Roman Polanski). ♦ Jan. 2 at 4:15: "California Split" (1974, Robert Altman). ♦ Jan. 2 at 6:30: "Belle de Jour" (1967, Luis Buñuel; in French). ♦ Jan. 2 at 8:30 and Jan. 4 at 1: "Scarecrow" (1973, Jerry Schatzberg). ♦ Jan. 3 at 2: "Excalibur" (1981, John Boorman). ♦ Jan. 3 at 5:15: "A Clockwork Orange" (1971, Stanley Kubrick). ♦ Jan. 3 at 8: "Fanny and Alexander" (1982, Ingmar Bergman). ♦ Jan. 4 at 3:30 and Jan. 6 at 6: "Days of Heaven" (1978, Terrence Malick). ♦ Jan. 4 at 5:15: "Kanal" (1956, Andrzej Wajda; in Polish). ♦ Jan. 4 at 7:30 and Jan. 5 at 1: "The American Friend" (1977, Wim Wenders; in German and English). ♦ Jan. 5 at 3:15 and Jan. 6 at 8: "The Hole" (1998, Tsai Ming-liang). ♦ Jan. 5 at 5: "The Sorrow and the Pity" (1971, Marcel Ophuls; in French and German).
SUNSHINE CINEMA
139-143 E. Houston St. (358-0573)—Midnight movies. Jan. 3-4: "Candy" (1968, Christian Marquand).
THALIA THEATRE
2537 Broadway, at 95th St. (864-5400)—Through April 6: "Singular Visions: New Voices Since the Eighties." Jan. 4 at 1 and 6:30: "Traffic" (2000, Steven Soderbergh). ♦ Jan. 4 at 3:45 and 9:15: "Sex, Lies, and Videotape" (1989, Soderbergh). ♦ Jan. 5 at 2 and 6:30: "Where Is the Friend's Home?" (1987, Abbas Kiarostami; in Farsi). ♦ Jan. 5 at 3:45 and 8:15: "Through the Olive Trees" (1994, Kiarostami; in Farsi).
WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (875-5600)—Through Jan. 9: "People Are Funny: The Films of Leo McCarey." Jan. 1 at 1 and 5:30: "An Affair to Remember" (1957). ♦ Jan. 1 at 3:30 and 8: "Love Affair" (1942). ♦ Jan. 2 at 3:30, 6:30, and 9:30: "Six of a Kind" (1934). ♦ Jan. 2 at 5 and 8: "Let's Go Native!" (1930). ♦ Jan. 3 at 3:15 and 7 and Jan. 4 at 6:15: "Ruggles of Red Gap" (†). ♦ Jan. 3 at 5:15 and 9 and Jan. 5 at 1:30: "Duck Soup" (1933). ♦ Jan. 4 at 3:45 and Jan. 5 at 3:10: Six short films. ♦ Jan. 4 at 8:15: "Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!" (1958). ♦ Jan. 5 at 5:30 and Jan. 7 at 3: "The Bells of St. Mary's" (1945). ♦ Jan. 5 at 8: "Going My Way" (†). ♦ Jan. 6 at 1, 5, and 9: "The Milky Way" (1936). ♦ Movies for Kids. Jan. 2-3 at 1 and Jan. 4 at 11 A.M. and 1:30: "Pee-wee's Big Adventure" (1985, Tim Burton).



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KEEPING THE HOLIDAYS AT THE HOTEL FLAMBEAU

For an entire season, mass media have bombarded us with manufactured holiday sentiment and rampant commercialism. Naturally, the way to counteract this uncultured cacophony is to create more celebrities.

There has been no lack of famous spokesmodels touting "the perfect gift," or country music stars posed 'round the fire with their "young'uns." What we need is a new breed of elite – a group of brilliant, irrepressible artisans upon whom we can rely for sparkling but malicious commentary, juicy gossip and intelligently notorious behavior. Perhaps this modern-day equivalent of the Algonquin Round Table could, with celebratory zeal, distract from crass, blatant exploitation and replace it with a more amusing, sophisticated presence.

Fortunately, there exists a refined yet boisterous collection of characters who meet regularly for lunch at an oval table in the dining room of the Hotel Flambeau. In the interest of shifting the focus of the yule season, even slightly, from mass consumption of mediocrity to tasteful revelry, joy and goodwill, we present the festive members of the Flambeau Oval Table.

Geoffrey Gimbel French – renowned dancer/choreographer, and producer of "French Hoof!" an instructional dance video series. Mr. French is quite full of himself this season, as his off-Broadway production, "Swingle Bell Bonanza – a Rhinestone Cowboy Christmas!" is a holiday smash. As a result, his frequently raised glass, filled with a ChocoMint Martini (2 parts VOX® Vodka, one part Creme de Cocoa, splash of Peppermint Schnapps), has been accompanied by particularly pointed remarks, as was this one, "Chubbs, I'll meet you under the mistletoe – but only if Donner or Blitzen are unavailable." Ms. Gaylord-Chubb took the greatest umbrage, bouncing a Camembert Puff off his ample, shiny brow.

Alexander Tittleton, Jr. – social gadfly and former ski jumper who now prefers hobbies that include a chair. Every year, Tittleton allows his younger brother, Luther, to solely manage the Tittleton Imports empire from Thanksgiving to New Year's. He then spends much of his time at the Flambeau, spreading cheer and toasting the absent Luther with festive rhymes like, "I don't mean to be so blunt, but Happy New Year and Cheers to the Runt!" Nor does he spare his oval tablemates his back-handed goodwill. Rising slowly from his chair with a focused grip on his frosty, he salutes Ms. Pelligan with the classic, "May the season bring you all you've ever wanted, and spare you all you deserve."

Elisa Barneveld Punderman – artist and photo editor at *Dermatology Today*. In order to "expand the scope, geography and waistline" of her friends and tablemates, Ms. Punderman hosted a holiday get-together at her townhouse on West 88th. She intended to open the evening by shooting a series of portraits, but abandoned plans when Mr. French danced with the tripod and lost the camera over the banister. Happily, the party picked up the moment she served the first pitcher of her infamous "Yule-Be-Dandy" Holiday Elixir (2 parts champagne, 2 parts pineapple juice, 1 part VOX Vodka).

Morton P. Vanderlick – master manipulator of stocks, bonds and other things liquid. While Mr. French duly notes that "Vanderlick's stiff upper lip seems to spread down his chin, around his jaw and throughout the neck and shoulders," he does become relaxed and raucous during the holidays. He had a decidedly Ebeneezer (post-ghost) moment at the Oval's New Year's party when he generously tipped the bartender and hopped over the bar, insisting everyone try his special Apple Mort-tinis (2 parts VOX Vodka, 1 part Sour Apple Schnapps and a splash of melon liqueur). To everyone's delight, he also produced a list of toasts, which started with "May we all realize our goals, take stock of ourselves – and sell."

Honoria Pelligan – magistrate for the New York District Court of Appeals until disbarment inspired her to pursue a literary career. Her column, *Pelligan Ponders*, featured her annual compendium of New Year's resolutions. Atop the list is "No more dates with men in plaid pants," followed closely by "No excuses – three sit-ups every week!" and "Do not drink champagne from a man's shoe." Tittleton, to his irritation, is mentioned in the final resolution, where Pelligan resolves to "Buy Alexander Tittleton, Jr. a muzzle or, at the very least, a heavy muffler."

Emily Gaylord-Chubb – accomplished art critic who views herself as "the eyes, ears, and smirk" of the fine art world. "Chubbs" elected to stay in the city over the holidays rather than "fleeing to higher ground" as she has in the past. Vowing to look past the tinsel, plastic Santas and incandescent baubles, she labored to create her own traditions and icons. She even hosted a holiday bash for her Oval tablemates to "huddle around her new Yule yucca." After a round of good-natured ridicule and chilled Mort-tinis, Chubbs thawed out, lit up a butt and croaked out a verse of "Jingle Bell Rock."

Chadwick Hedley – The title "toastmaster general," perhaps to everyone's relief, has remained vacant for years – until now. Mr. Hedley's penchant for extemporaneous public speaking, especially during cocktails – was brought to a boil this season. On the first day of Christmas, he offered salutations at five parties and a wedding reception. By the ninth day, he made appearances and toasts at a hockey game and a briss – and earned an ejection from his nephew's grade school play by raising a glass of punch to, "that fabulous, freckled angel who brays like a donkey!" By the time the Hotel Flambeau Party rolled around, he had lost his voice, which was roundly appreciated and unanimously toasted as "a very special Oval Table miracle."

Granted, the creation of more celebrities may result in nothing more than a bit of passing amusement. But as you observe the Oval closely, you'll find an aura of celebratory joy unique to discerning individuals who share life on a higher plane. To a degree, we are all a product of that which surrounds us. When we raise the bar on our endeavors, diversions and festivities, we are the better and the happier for it.

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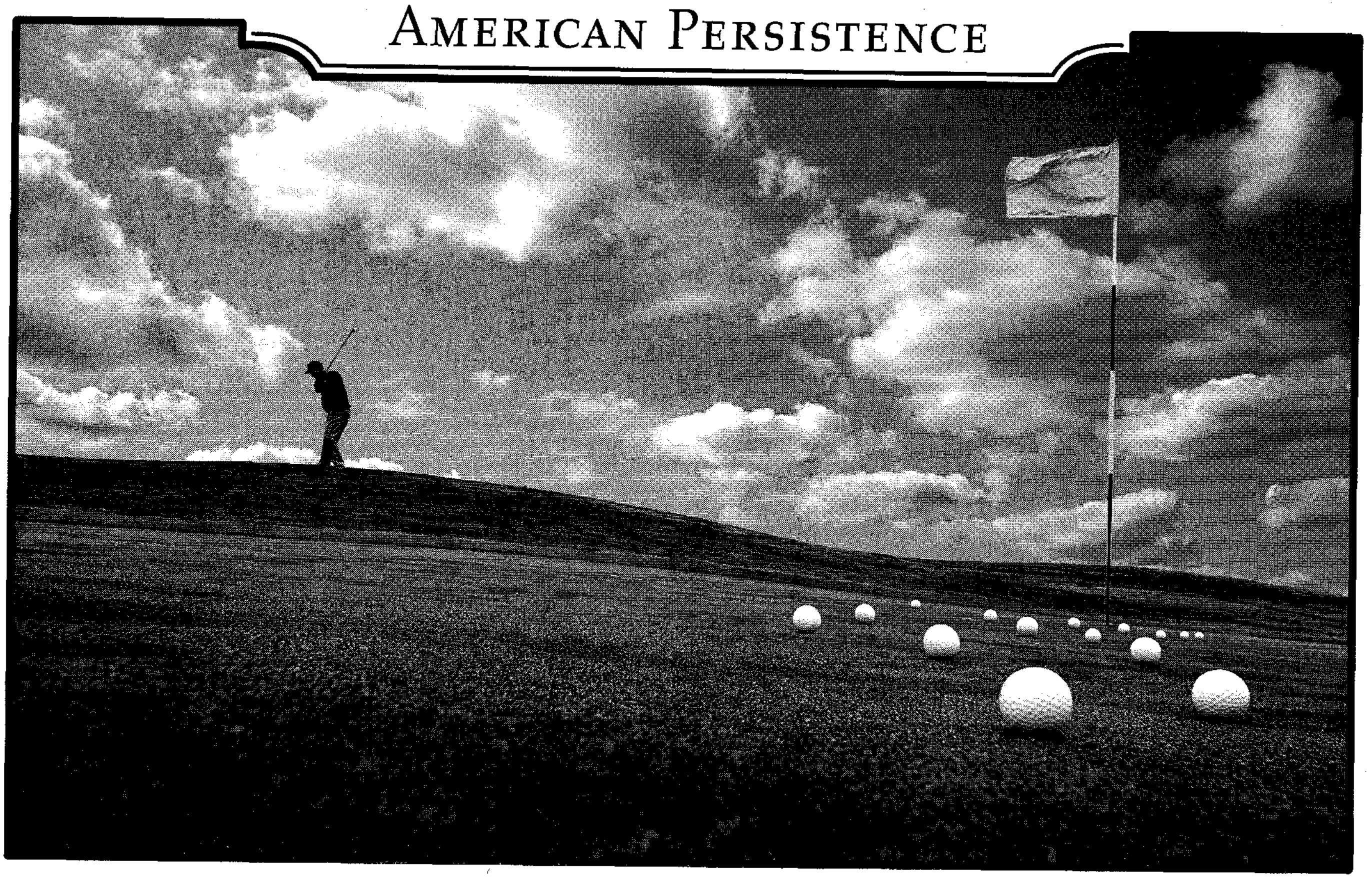

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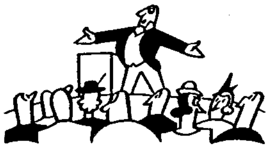
THE
NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

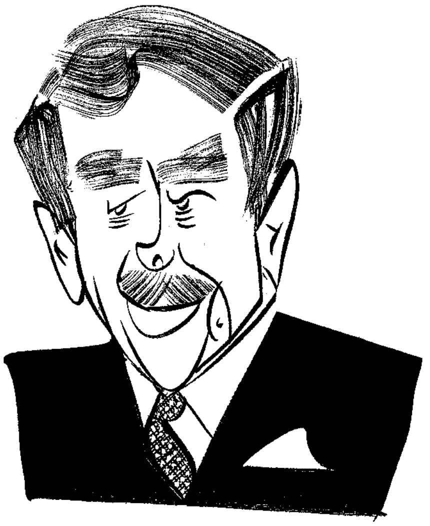
COMMENT
LEAVING THE CASTLE



The course of power ultimately changes only if there are forces present to oppose it. The Bush Administration, for example, rarely feels the rub of resistance; it is able to justify gratuitous tax breaks, snuggle up to friendly corporations, and fling environmentalism on the slag heap not least because the Democrats—cowed, confused, incoherent—too often end up speaking, when they speak at all, in the helium voice of a Warner Bros. pipsqueak. They hide, hoping that power, in the shape of a self-revealing grotesque (e.g., Trent Lott), will do all the work for them. It's a tactic of vacuous exhaustion, not a strategy of intellectual energy and moral direction.

One of history's prime examples of the potential of political opposition—pure and peaceful, yet historically fierce—played out in the late nineteen-eighties in Eastern Europe, when hundreds of intellectuals, such as George Konrád in Budapest, Adam Michnik in Warsaw, Andrei Sakharov in Moscow, and Václav Havel in Prague, who for decades had exemplified Solzhenitsyn's precept to "live not by lies," endured to see an imperium collapse under the weight of its own leaden deceptions. Some of those intellectuals crossed over from the realm of moral example to the practicalities of building a new politics. They became university presidents, diplomats, newspaper editors. Some were elected to their countries' new parliaments. One went to the palace.

That one, of course, was Václav Havel. In November, 1989, Havel was still a "dissident playwright," the bluejeaned spokesman of the Civic Forum coalition that opposed the Communist regime; a short while later, with the regime gently toppled, he was the leader of a nascent democratic republic and, a few months after that, its well-tailored President. For the thirteen years since, in a scenario that was part Kafka, part fairy tale (or are they the same?), Havel has lived atop the ramparts of the highest hill in Prague. The spooks who tapped his telephone now guard his person; the bureaucrats who intercepted his mail now distribute his speeches; the castle that may have inspired "The Castle" now houses Kafka's most appreciative reader. Havel has helped create a civil society through the probity of his example (no Czech could forget that, as a dissident, he stayed in his jail cell rather than accept the freedom of coerced emigration) and the clarity of his essays ("The Power of the Powerless," "Beyond the Shock of Freedom"). He had the prophetic moral force of Solzhenitsyn, but he was neither reclusive nor anti-modern; while Solzhenitsyn rejected Western popular culture as the "manure" that flowed east under the Iron Curtain, Havel embraced Beckett and Frank Zappa, Ginsberg and Lou Reed. It was the arrest of a rock group, the Plastic People of the Universe, that had set him, in 1976, on the path of leadership among the dissidents. The arrests, he wrote, were "an attack on life itself." Soon he was involved in drafting the founding document of Czech opposition, Charter 77.



Václav Havel

In early February, Havel will live for the first time since childhood as a normal citizen of what in the totalitarian era was a dream as impossible and beguiling as Oz: "a normal country." What a performance it has been! In mid-September, Havel arrived in New York to give a speech at the City University Graduate Center. His physical appearance, as always, was at once riveting and unpretentious, with his Presidential armor (the good suit, the tie snug at the neck, the bodyguards, the nimbus of politicians

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

and glitterati) doing little to mask his slouchy, half-shy bearing. In his years in office, he admitted, he has grown less confident and increasingly nervous. ("You may not believe this, but every day I suffer more and more from stagefright.")

During the weeks of revolution, Havel was the coolest, most self-assured figure imaginable. He was the least plastic person in the universe, presiding over surreal press conferences at the Magic Lantern theatre and directing mass demonstrations in Wenceslas Square, where Soviet tanks had once thundered over the cobblestones. And then, in an instant, just five years after his release from jail, Havel was in the Castle, signing papers, meeting foreign dignitaries, and, in time, battling his own prime minister and presiding over the painful division of Czechoslovakia into Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The years since 1989, he acknowledged, have been difficult, flawed, a "hard fall to earth, from the exhilarating world of revolutionary excitement into the mundane world of bureaucratic routine."

Havel is a liberal—and, unlike many American liberals, he is proud to proclaim it. As he begins to make his exit, it is worth adding up what his liberalism has wrought. He helped bring freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of commerce to his country. The Czech Republic is a member of NATO and will soon join the European Union. Czechs (Slovaks, too) travel at their pleasure. But Havel has also, unlike some other European leaders, refused to renounce, or even flinch from, the potential of power, even armed power, in the name of security and justice. His government pushed (in vain) for the West to intervene more quickly and completely in Rwanda. He pressed for armed intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo. And now, in the age of stateless terrorism, he is unabashedly in favor, as he said in New York, of the principle that "evil must be confronted in its womb and, if there is no other way to do it, then it has to be dealt with by the use of force."

Among Havel's myriad achievements, one of the most lasting is that he has helped to reorder our thinking about artist-intellectuals and political influence. Who is left to prize the fevered delusions of Sartre and Pound, the selective political blindnesses of Aragon and Shaw, when there is the clear-eyed example of Havel? Who is left to question that a thinking person, profound and humane, can find a place in real politics, both in opposition and in power? Countless countries still seem doomed to autocracy without a homegrown version of its antidote. Havel's journey has shown a way out. He leaves the Castle having provided the gift of normalcy to his people, and having restored to many others the dimensions and vigor of the liberal idea.

—*David Remnick*

TO A WELL-CONNECTED MOUSE

(Upon reading of the genetic closeness of mice and men.)

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,
Braw science says that at the leastie
We share full ninety-nine per cent
O' genes, where'er the odd ane went.

O nibblin, pink-tail'd, bright-ee'd sir,
We hail frae ane sma' fearful blur
'Neath dinosaur feet, lang syne—
Na mair be pestie, cousin mine.

Stay oot my larder, oot my traps
An' they'll snap softer doon, p'rhaps,
For theft and murther blither go
When a's i' th' family, bro' an' bro'.

—*John Updike*

KEEP STILL DEPT.
THE LAST GOOD HAIRCUT

Early in December, a sign went up at Michael's Children's Haircutting Salon, on Madison Avenue between Ninetieth and Ninety-first Streets, announcing that three days before New Year's Eve, after ninety-two years of tending to the towheads and mop tops of Carnegie Hill (and points well beyond), Michael's would be shutting its doors for good.

In New York, venerable establishments with loyal customers close pretty much every other day; if they didn't, people would have little to say to each other as they went out on their neighborhood rounds (if people still do go out on neighborhood rounds). Nonetheless, the passing of Michael's bears notice. There are many reasons that most private-school boys in Manhattan look alike, or similar, and one is that they all seem to get their hair cut at Michael's, by one of four barbers: the owner, Nick Di Sisto, his brother Pat, Salvatore Olentino, or Tony DiMaggio. The Michael's haircut is the classic you-got-a-haircut job: partable bangs, shorn neck, ears free and clear, but enough of a thatch left on top to signify to doormen and piano teachers that the head on which the hair sits belongs to a kid who has money and a tendency to get his own way. Michael's is legendary among parents for having the mojo to get kids to sit still for scissors. For the most part, the barbers eschew bribery in favor of firm cajoling and spirited patter, though they do deploy lollipops: if you're good, you get one (or even two) when the cutting is done.

The décor is that of an old-fashioned barbershop: six chairs, bright lights, marble walls, faded newspaper clippings, bottles of Pinaud Clubman styling gel and talc. There are also three metal cars from the thirties, for the little kids to sit in. The place achieved some renown in the mid-sixties, when it was owned by Sam Michael Fiscella. (Di Sisto took over in 1974.) The young John F. Kennedy, Jr., had his hair cut there, and patrons came in asking for the John-John cut. In 1965, *Women's Wear Daily* did a piece on the place, taking note of the "dried lollypop drool" on the old leather seats.

The other day, a half hour before closing time, the place was full (it was visiting-Grandma season). Nick Di Sisto, a keen-eyed, gray-haired sixty-one-year-old who came to New York in 1957 from Campobasso, Italy, was working comb and scissors through the bangs of a black-haired thirteen-year-old named Jonathan. Jonathan stared straight ahead at the mirror as Nick told him about the wonders of the Amalfi Coast ("nice fresh pasta"). Pat Di Sisto was at the next chair, dabbing the back of a boy's neck with talc. "He likes the powder," said the boy's mother, who was waiting by the door. Pat tapped him on the shoulder, and the boy stood up. "Say thank you," his mother called out.

"Thank you," the boy said.

"Thank you for helping me out my entire little life," the mother prompted.

"Thank you for helping me out my entire little life."

"You're welcome," Pat said.

Jonathan was done, too. He rose, ran his hand through his hair, glanced back at the mirror, nodded, then drew a money clip from his pocket and handed Nick a twenty and a five—the standard price. "I come here twice a month," Jonathan said as he pulled on his coat. "I like the shop. What am I going to do from now on? I'm not sure. Maybe I'll go to Italy."

Nick explained his predicament as he wielded the scissors on his next customer, a boy in Buckley gym shorts named Alexis (pronounced "Alexi"—"It's French"). Nick's lease had run out. The landlord had raised the rent by a hundred per cent. Business had been good but not great. After 9/11, a lot of people moved out of town, though some of those old customers still came in for haircuts. So now it was over. "We're sad and we're happy," he said. "I'm tired. I gotta relax. We love children, but children are tough business. You gotta be fast with your hands. Kids don't tell you when they're gonna move. You gotta be ready. Tension, tension."

When Alexis was finished, Pat declared, "That is your last real, good haircut." The boy was asked how he thought his classmates would react to his haircut the next day. He considered this, and said, "They'll say, 'Nice hair.' "

A few blocks south on Madison is another children's hair salon. It is called Cozy's Cuts for Kids and was established in 1994. Cozy's is a toy store, too. Instead of Pinaud Clubman gels and talcs, its walls and shelves are stocked with Barney videos, Spider-Man watches, and such products as Groovy Girls Fashion Blizzard and Rubber Stamps with Pretty Animals. The founder of Cozy's, a thirty-seven-year-old woman named Cozy Friedman, says that she got the first haircut of her life at Michael's, in 1966 or so. Her family lived in Brooklyn, but her mother read about the John-John cut in a magazine and decided to bring her two children in to Michael's to get their hair done right.

At Cozy's, the barber chairs face television screens. The idea is that to distract the children as they get their hair cut you let them watch a video or play video games. The other night, after Michael's had closed, two kids were left in Cozy's, one about ten, the other about five. The older one, R.J., was playing Nintendo; the younger one, Jacob, was watching "Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius." Their barbers snipped and their mothers loomed. When R.J. was done, he wouldn't leave his seat; his game of Super Mario 64 wasn't over. Eventually, his mother coaxed him out toward the door, but then he saw "Jimmy Neutron" and decided that his hair needed a little more work. He sat down next to Jacob and stared at the set as the barber pretended to tidy up around his sideburns. (Friedman says that some kids are so eager to come to Cozy's that parents will bring them in for fake haircuts.) Soon, that work, such as it was, was finished as well.

"R.J., come on."

"Wait."

"Wait what?"

Silence.

"R.J."

"I have to see this."

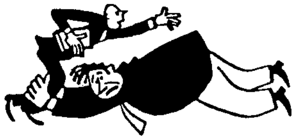
"Come on, let's go."

He did not move.

—*Nick Paumgarten*

THE APPELLATIVE COURT

THE REAL JACK ASS



The matter of Jack Ass v. Viacom International Inc. concerns an electrical lineman in Montana named Jack Ass, who stumbled upon the MTV show "Jackass" two years ago and was moved to mark his displeasure with litigation. The other day, in the Montana Twentieth Judicial District Court, Ass filed a six-page complaint against Viacom, which owns MTV, for "plagiarizing" and "defaming" his name with a TV show and a movie depicting young men who, among other things, snort lines of wasabi and pee on snow and eat it.

Ass is forty-four. He lives in Hot Springs, a ranching community of about five hundred people, seventy-five miles north of Missoula, in a tiny one-room structure he calls the Jack Shack. Just recently, he got rabbit ears for his TV, and now it receives one channel. It is not MTV. If he wants to watch cable, he calls a buddy and asks if he can come over. Sometimes he says, "Hi, it's Jack," and sometimes he says, "Hi, it's Bozo."

"It's only a small lateral step sideways from Bozo to Jack Ass," he explained the other day. "I can be Bozo or Jack Ass."

He has been Jack Ass for only five years. Before that, he was Bob Craft. But in 1990 his brother died in a car accident, and seven years later he decided to change his name, to help a cartoon character he had created, named Andi Ass, crusade against drunk driving. On two Web sites and through a not-for-profit organization called Hearts Across America—the operations are run out of the Jack Shack—the two Asses promote designated driving and personal responsibility, with slogans like "Be a smart ass, not a dumb ass." The Asses differ from the "Jackass" movie in that they have never promoted jumping head first into the blades of a moving ceiling fan.

The reason for the delay between the show's première, two years ago, and Ass's recent filing is not complicated. "I couldn't find an attorney," Ass said. "Listen, lawyers are not just going to pipe up—they're not going to say they don't have courage. They give me lame excuses. One is too busy. They won't do it on contingency. Some say I may have a case and they want to look deeper. Then they don't call back."

Ass went ahead and filed the suit on his own. It took about a month of work. "Anyone can do it," he said. "You'd be surprised. It's an educational process. You do some research. And there's some rules you have to learn." His language in the complaint is fairly standard. "Comes now, Plaintiff, Jack Ass," it begins and goes on to accuse Viacom of being "liable for injury to a reputation Plaintiff has built and defamation of character Plaintiff has created."

It continues, "I strongly feel that the Defendants Plagiarized, trademark and copyright infringement on my legal name (Jack Ass) and the cartoon character (Andi Ass)." And, "Therefore I (Jack Ass) pray this court will punish the Defendants to the maximum the law allows and that damages are no less than $10,000,000."

Viacom had nothing to say about the suit, but one of the creators of "Jackass," Johnny Knoxville (real name: P. J. Clapp), who is mentioned in the suit, said, "What do I care? I can't wait to get served the papers. What could be more American than just suing the living shit out of someone for no reason at all?"

Some of Ass's legal theories remain under close guard. When he was asked how his research proved Viacom's defamation, Ass paused for nearly a minute, then said politely, "I'm not going to answer that question. If I tell you that, then when I do find an attorney he'll be cranked as heck if I gave away all the answers."

—*Michael Rosenwald*

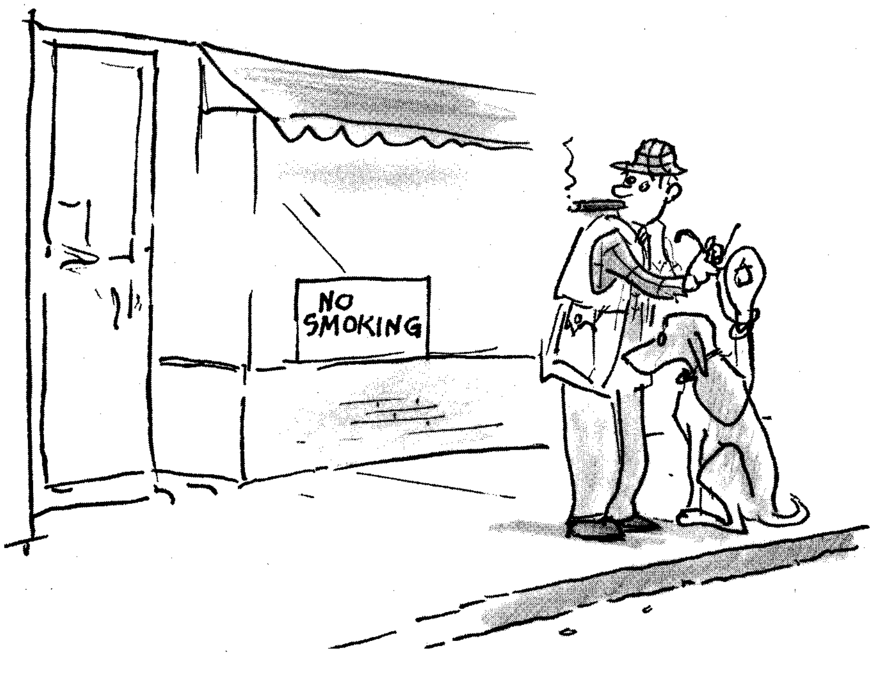
HEADGEAR

HATS TO DIE IN

Caryl Churchill's new play, "Far Away," depicts a surreal dystopia, not too far in the future, in which a totalitarian government performs weekly mass executions to the accompaniment of tinny martial music; a global war has escalated so that not only have the French and the Chinese formed strategic alliances but so have the world's cats, crocodiles, and rivers; and the millinery trade has been taken over by the government, to perverse and sickening ends. The dramatic centerpiece of the play, which is currently showing at New York Theatre Workshop, is a stunning cavalcade of thirty-five hats, among them one in the shape of a black galleon, another with a bright-red wimple and enormous globes over the ears, like something that might be worn by a punk nun. The unfortunate wearers of the hats—they include an athletic-looking man whose hat is bedecked with a big rose, and a wan woman who trails a train of red net bigger than she is—are destined for a rather less pleasant fate than a day out at the Easter Parade, as is revealed by the rest of their outfits, which consist of prison pajamas and manacles around their wrists and ankles.

The hats were created by Catherine Zuber, the show's costume designer. "The structure of the hat is born out of the hat telling you, in a way, what it needs to be," Zuber explained one recent chilly morning, backstage at the theatre. She drew her inspiration from hat history—the galleon hat is based on an eighteenth-century illustration—and from contemporary haute couture. The showstopper hat, a midnight-blue snake of fabric rising in coils above its wearer's head, with a silver star burst on top, is a copy of a Philip Treacy design. (A milliner in Washington named Ted Stumpf was responsible for much of the actual hatmaking.) To assemble the hats, Zuber raided the storerooms of other theatres—one headpiece of antlers decorated with flowers had previously done service in "The Merry Wives of Windsor"—and specialty stores for such necessities as vulture feathers and large quantities of ostrich plumes.

Zuber said that she thought the symbolic role of the hats was to show how creative people can become complacent about the political sufferings of those around them; but she admitted that that was only her own interpretation of Churchill's millinery motif. "The hats needed to have a joy and a level of creativity," she said. "If the hats were badly made, it wouldn't show the tenderness and the beauty, even in this bleakness." The actors who appear in the nightly hat parade have become attached to their assigned headgear, in spite of the dark purposes to which the hats are put. "People get



really sad if they don't get the hat they want," Zuber said. Her own favorite is one in the shape of a bouquet of roses, perched aslant on the head, though the hat she'd chosen to wear that day was a more modest production: a burgundy-colored knit skullcap. "I got it at Barneys," she said.

—*Rebecca Mead*

BREAK PLATES DEPT.
BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING BAND

George Stathos, who describes himself as "the tallest Greek you'll ever meet in your life," is the elegant, lugubrious front man for My Greek Wedding Band, an outfit that, until recently, was known to connubially minded Mediterranean New Yorkers as George Stathos and Company. The band decided on the new name around the time that "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," the five-million-dollar movie that features the band's music, had grossed twenty million of the two hundred and fifteen million dollars that it has grossed so far. "The 'My' and the 'Greek' remind you of the movie title—and the 'Wedding,' of course," Stathos said over a glass of retsina at Uncle Nick's in Hell's Kitchen. "When I told some other Greek musicians about the new name, they said, 'That's a terrible name! Why're you gonna use that name?' And I said, 'Well, can you think of a better one?' And they said, 'No—but if you got any extra jobs throw them our way!' "

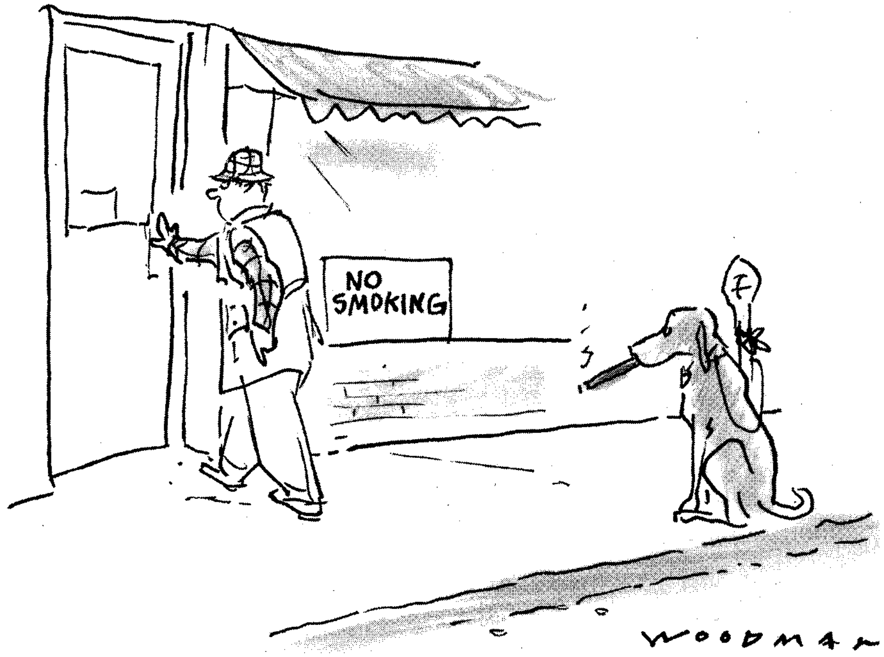
Stathos, who is six feet three, has dark-gray woolly hair, big ears, and ledgelike cheekbones. He plays the clarinet, which he calls "the folk instrument of Greece," and speaks better Greek than his second-generation parents. For the past fifteen years, the band—clarinet, accordion, guitar, bouzouki, darbuka (an hourglass-shaped hand drum), and female vocalist—has performed seventy to eighty gigs a year, including baptisms, folk festivals, back-yard parties, engagement parties, and weddings. Over the years, Stathos said, more and more clients were asking for modern Greek music played at "rock volume," or, worse, he said, "they were hiring d.j.s." Then one day about nine months ago, Stathos got a call from a musician named Emanuel Kiriakou, who said that he was looking for traditional Greek players to record pieces he had composed for the film. Kiriakou, Stathos, and his band performed some original songs for the "Greek Wedding" score, among them "Tsifteteli" ("Belly Dance"), "Tis Nyfis Ta Vimata" ("The Bride's Dance"), and "Kefi in Katavia." ("Kefi" means "good feeling," and Katavia is an imaginary place with a Greek-sounding name.) Stathos was paid four hundred dollars for each of the five songs that were used. "The movie was so perfect because we got to actually play a classy Greek wedding and play traditional music, without people saying, 'What's that weird Chinese music?'" (Stathos thinks that a clarinet being played too loud through a microphone has this effect.)

Only "Kefi in Katavia" made it onto the movie's soundtrack CD, which also includes songs by a Toronto group called The Greek Wedding Band. "They don't have it trademarked, as I do," Stathos said. "I checked with my attorney." Stathos plans to record and release his own CD as My Greek Wedding Band soon. "My dream is to play Greek music in its purest form for everyone—Greeks, non-Greeks." (A dream he won't speak about for fear of attracting the evil eye is a possible Broadway musical adaptation of the movie, and a CBS sitcom, which is already in the works.) Stathos is thinking of advertising in American bridal magazines and has taken out a spot in the *National Herald*, the oldest Greek-American newspaper in the country. But the most visible form of promotion right now is the blue flyers that have been turning up in lower Manhattan, at places like Starbucks, offering the services of the "musicians from the score of the hit movie." "I don't know how those got up there," Stathos said. "I think one of the guys in the band did it. I'm like, 'Don't do that. That's kind of schlocky.' I think it was the drummer—he's crazy. All drummers are crazy. Did you know that?"

Stathos, who used to charge two thousand dollars a gig, now asks for three to five thousand. He is talking to a West Coast manager (actually, his old manager, from the seventies in New York, who is now a distributor for Kronos foods) about playing in L.A.—"high-level gigs for rich Greeks."

Like the band's name, the name of Stathos's fiancée and publicist, Diane Golfinopoulos—formerly Golfin—was re-Hellenized for the Greek moment. (Her grandfather had changed it when he emigrated from Greece.) "Now, with the whole new Greek-identity thing, we're adding syllables back to our names," Stathos, whose grandfather shortened his name from Stathopoulos, said. "Cristo!" he shouted to the waiter. "Cristaki!"

—*Dana Goodyear*



PERSONAL HISTORY

IL DUCE'S PORTRAITS

Living with Mussolini.

BY ITALO CALVINO

You could say that I spent the first twenty years of my life with Mussolini's face always in view, in the sense that his portrait hung in every classroom as well as in every public building or office I entered. I could, therefore, try to chart a history of the evolution of Mussolini's image through his official portraits as they have remained in my memory.

I began my first year of primary school in 1929, and I remember very clearly the Mussolini portraits of that period: he was still dressed in civilian clothes, with a stiff upturned collar, as was common among important people in those days. (This look was to become old-fashioned in the years immediately following.) That is the way I remember him in the colored lithograph that hung in our classroom (on a side wall—the spot above the teacher's desk was still reserved for the King) and in a black-and-white photograph at the back of our ancient spelling books (a picture that looked as if it had been added on in the most recent editions).

In those years, then, there persisted the first image that Mussolini had wanted to give of himself on seizing power, which was meant to emphasize a certain continuity and the respectability of the man who had restored order. The portrait ended at his tie, but the jacket worn by the Head of Government was probably a morning coat (the black jacket with tails known in Italy—and only in Italy—as a "tight"), which he habitually wore, in those days, at official ceremonies.

In these portraits, Mussolini still had black hair on his temples and maybe (I am not sure) in the middle of his balding head. The statesman's dress accentuated his youthfulness, because that was the real novelty that the images had to convey (though I couldn't have known this at six); no one then had ever heard of a prime minister who was only forty. Nor had anyone ever seen in Italy a statesman without a beard or a mustache, and this in itself was a sign of modernity. It was common practice to shave, but the most significant politicians during and after the Great War all still wore facial hair. This was true throughout the world, I would say (I'm writing this without consulting any books or encyclopedias), with the sole exception of the American Presidents. Even the quadrumvirate who led the March on Rome had mustaches, and two of the four had beards. (I don't think that historians are likely to emphasize the facial-hair aspect of the various epochs, and yet these are surely messages that have a meaning, especially in periods of transition.)

In short, Mussolini's image in those days was meant to express at the same time modernity, efficiency, and a reassuring continuity, along with authoritarian severity. This aim was certainly intended to counter a previous image, one associated with the period of Fascist lynch squads. Among my memories there is a portrait that I would date to that violent period (even if I saw it a little later): a dramatic black-and-white photograph, signed with the strong-willed "M," which would become famous. His face, angled slightly sideways, jutted out from a darkness that could have been his black shirt but was also a shadowy background like that evoked by the words "the gang of Piazza Sansepolcro," with which—as we were taught—the new age had begun.

The climate of violence of the Fascist action squads was also captured in my very first childhood memories (at least one of the last outbursts, which occurred in 1926), but by the time I started school the world seemed calm and orderly. The traces of a period of civil war emerged only occasionally, endowed with a dark attraction for a child at a time when the official portraits

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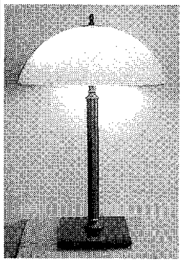

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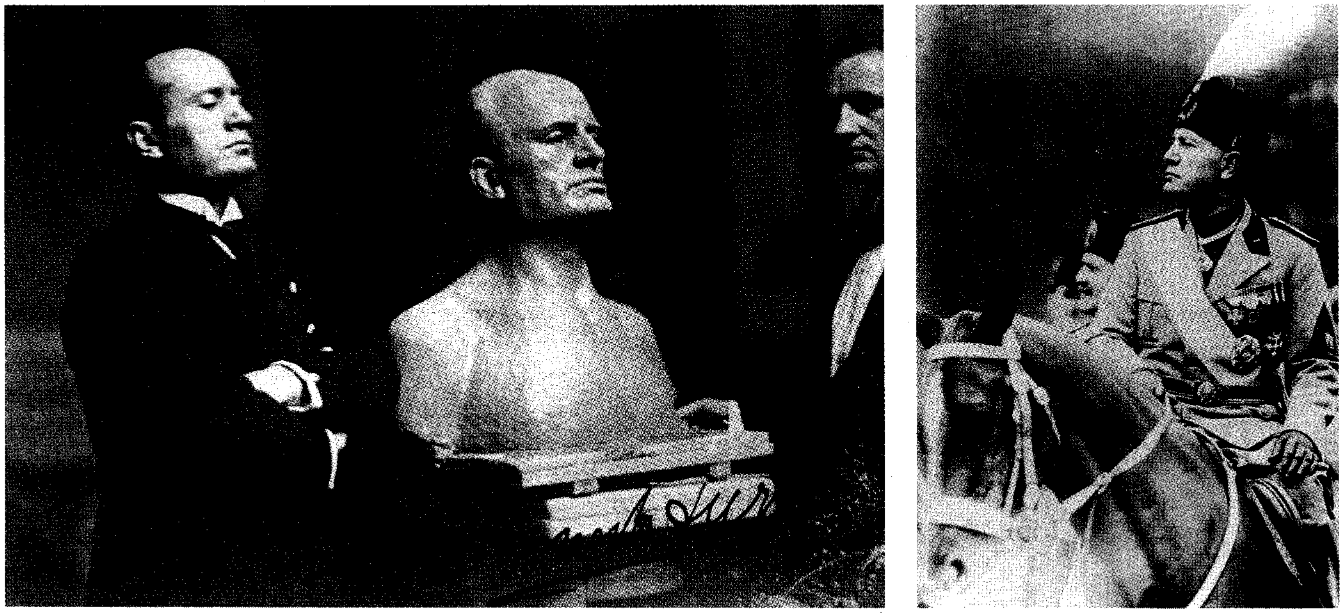
of Il Duce implied a discipline that tolerated no dissent.

The other salient feature of these first official images of the dictator was the pensive pose, the prominent forehead seeming to underline his capacity for thought. In one of the affectionate games that people used to play at the time with children of one or two years, the adult would say, "Do Mussolini's face," and the child would furrow his brow and stick out angry lips. In a word, Italians of my generation carried the portrait of Mussolini within themselves, even before they were of an age to recognize it on the walls, and this reveals that there was (also) something infantile in that image, that look of concentration which small children can have, and which does not actually mean that they are thinking intensely about anything.



Italians of my generation carried the portrait of Mussolini within themselves, even before they were of an age to recognize it.

LEFT: BETTMANN/CORBIS; AKG LONDON

I will talk here only about the portraits and the photographs that I saw during the twenty years of Fascism, leaving aside the enormous amount of documentation I came across later, in the four decades or so of post-Fascism. This means that I will talk only about official images, since no others circulated then: official images in portraits, statues, films made by Mussolini's Luce Cinema Institute (the newsreels of the time), and illustrated newspapers. In the last category there were basically two: the very popular *Domenica del Corriere* and *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, which was a fortnightly magazine aimed at a more upmarket readership.

I recall having seen at the time the famous photograph of Mussolini in his top hat going to sign the Lateran Concordat, and I thought back to that image shortly afterward, when I heard the grownups saying that the regime had abolished the "stovepipe" (as the top hat was called), the symbol of bourgeois traditionalism. As I was unaware of the dialectic of history, this seemed to me an inexplicable contradiction.

I don't know if the day he signed the treaty was the last time Mussolini wore a top hat, but it could well have been, because now, having secured the Church's support, he could start putting Italy into uniform. This shift in Fascist style (at least as it was perceived in the provinces) I would date to 1932, the tenth anniversary of the Fascist revolution—a tenth anniversary that remains linked in my memory with a fortnight's holiday I took during my fourth year of primary school, and with a series of commemorative stamps.

By that stage, Mussolini's iconography had taken an important step forward in its glorification of the Roman Empire—so much so that one of the stamps in the series portrayed the equestrian monument to Il Duce at the Stadium of Bologna, modelled on Verrocchio's statue of Colleoni, with the inscription "*Se avanzo seguitemi*" ("If I advance, follow me"). There was a second part to this lapidary sentence—"*Se indietreggio uccidetemi*" ("If I retreat, kill me")—which would come to pass in due time. It has to be said that there were not many stamps (I could not tell you of any others) that portrayed Mussolini. Stamps were one of the few domains where the sovereignty of the Sovereign continued to be displayed: a Victor Emmanuel III whose bodiless head appeared to be that of an extremely tall man.

The equestrian-monument Duce appeared in profile—another important shift, from the frontal image to the side image, which was much exploited from that point on, in that it enhanced his perfectly spherical cranium (without which the great transformation of the dictator into a graphic object would not have been possible), the strength of his jaw (which was emphasized also in the three-quarters pose), the continuous line from the back of his head to his neck, and the over-all Romanness of the whole.

It was in those final years of primary school that my enrollment in the Balilla, the Fascist youth group for boys, could no longer be postponed, because it had become compulsory even in the private school that I attended. I remember very clearly the smell of musty fabric in the warehouse of the Casa del Balilla, where we bought the uniforms; I remember the old storekeeper, a wounded war veteran; but what I want to recall now is the medal showing Il Duce in profile, which

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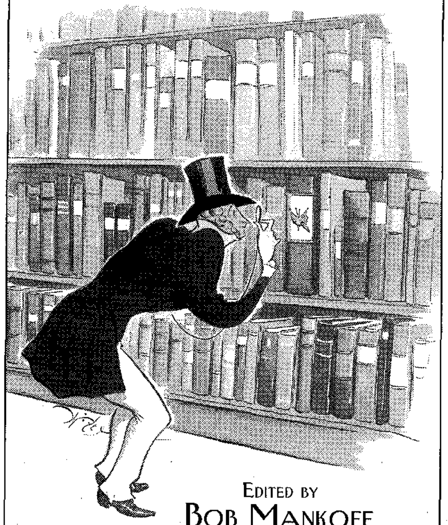

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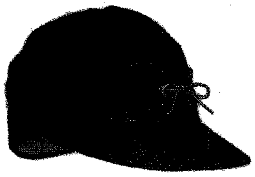

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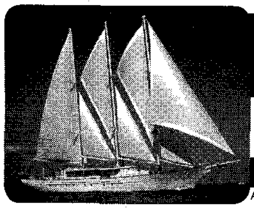

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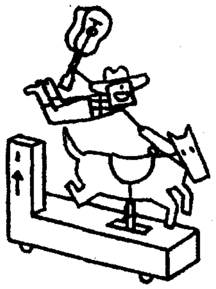
served to pin my blue kerchief in place (the color symbolized Dalmatia; or that was how it was explained to us, following a logic whose connections mean nothing now). I remember this profile portrait with the helmet, but the adoption of the helmet must have come a few years later than the memory I am trying to focus on now; so either the blue kerchief was initially tied without a medal or there was an earlier version of the medal showing his profile with a bare head. What I wanted to get at was the dating of the moment when Il Duce became a profile on a medal, like a Roman Emperor (thus invading the numismatic field, which had been reserved for the King, for more than one reason), but I do not have enough evidence available.

We are still in the years 1933 and 1934. It was then that I saw a portrait (or sculpture) of Mussolini in the "Cubist" style, in the sense that it was in the shape of a cube with geometrical features. This was in an exhibition of drawings put on by the local primary school, where I had to take the high-school entrance exam. The cube, with an inscription that said something like "Portrait of Il Duce as Il Duce Prefers," was displayed as a model for the children's drawings. For me this memory marks the first notion I had of the existence of a "Fascist style" based on the modernity of smooth, square surfaces, which would superimpose itself on and in many cases become identical with "twentieth-century style" that was already widespread even in the provinces.

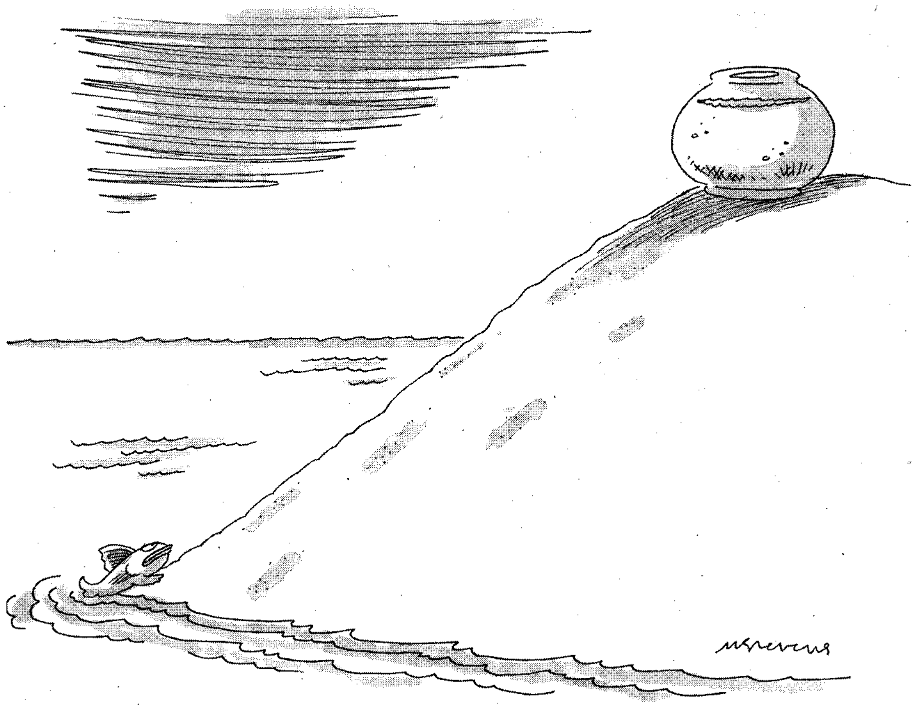
Conforming to this style was the inscription "DVX," which looked like a Roman numeral, on the bases of busts or columns, often symmetrically placed alongside the analogous word "REX." (By this point, the portraits of King and Duce were always together, and if one was missing it was not Il Duce's.) In a more neoclassical and sinuous twentieth-century style was the bust by Wildt, with laurel crown, toga, and empty eye sockets: an image that seemed very different from the ones that were current but which nevertheless had the stamp of official approval, in that it appeared as the frontispiece of the edition of Mussolini's "Scritti e Discorsi" ("Writings and Speeches").

I would like also to recall here an image that was in all our reading books: of the house in Predappio where Il Duce was born. That, too, was given to schoolchildren to copy; and here I have no objection, because it was a very beautiful house to draw—a traditional Italian country house, with an outside staircase, a very high ground floor, and walls with few windows.

The classic image of Mussolini was by then established and was not destined to change throughout the peak period of his dictatorship (namely, the better part of the nineteen-thirties). Radio and cinema were the principal media not only for the diffusion of this image but also for its very formation. I never went to any mass rallies where Mussolini was present, because I hardly ever left the provincial area I was brought up in, which he did not like and never visited, but I believe that the leader's image was more effective and tangible when seen in the cinema than it was when viewed directly by the crowd beneath that balcony; and in any case his voice was always transmitted via loudspeakers. The audiovisual media of the time were, in short, an essential component of Mussolini's Roman cult.



Another necessary component was, of course, the prohibition of any criticism or sarcasm. One of the first Mussolini speeches I remember was, I think, the one about "*libro e moschetto, fascista perfetto*" ("book and rifle make the perfect Fascist"). At the end of it, Il Duce brought out from under the windowsill a book and a rifle: a wonderful coup de théâtre. I remember having heard about this at home from an anti-Fascist uncle who had seen it in the cinema. (If it was not that speech, it must have been another from the same time, shortly after 1930; this can be checked on film.) I recall my uncle aping Mussolini's gestures, his fists firmly on his hips, and at a certain point blowing his nose into his hand. I remember my aunt's interjection: "Well, what do you expect? He's a bricklayer!" A few days later, I saw the newsreel of the speech, and recognized the grimaces described by my uncle—even the quick blowing of the nose. The image of Mussolini came to me filtered through the sarcastic dis-



course of adults (certain adults), which jarred with the chorus of praise. But that chorus was expressed in public, whereas the reservations were confined to private conversations, and never put a dent in the façade of unanimity of which the regime made a great show.

Mussolini soon learned that the camera mercilessly emphasized every grimace and tic in his gestures, and I think that if you went through the films of his speeches chronologically you would see how his control of each gesture and pause and acceleration in oratorical rhythm became more and more effective. However, the essential style of his performances did not change. Nowadays, when young people see old films of Mussolini they find him ridiculous and cannot understand how it was that vast crowds praised him to the skies. And yet the Mussolini model of oratory has continued to find imitations and variations all over the world, even in our own time, especially under populist or Third World auspices that exploit the same regressive techniques.

In an age when enormous possibilities opened up for manipulating the masses and for using them to consolidate power, Mussolini was one of the first leaders to construct a personality that corresponded to this intention in every single detail. The image of himself as a popular leader with all the attributes that the masses of his day found easiest to swallow—energy, arrogance, bellicosity, the posture of a Roman *condottiero*, a plebeian pride that contrasted with everything that had until then formed the image of a statesman—he communicated through the physical characteristics of his person, his military dress, his speeches punctuated by brief "lapidary" phrases, his booming voice, even his pronunciation (in the words "Ita*gl*ia" and "Ita*gl*iani," for instance, the sounds of his Emilia-Romagna origins took on an assertive note). Once the idea had been planted in people's heads that a leader must be endowed with an image like his, it was implicit that whoever did not possess that image could not be a leader.

For Hitler, who physically was the complete opposite of Mussolini, this must have been an enormous problem, in the period when Mussolini was his model. (The person who understood this with supreme psychological sophistication was Charlie Chaplin, in "The Great Dictator.") Hitler managed to overcome his handicap by going in the opposite direction from Il Duce, emphasizing the nervous agitation of his looks (his face, his mustache, his quiff of hair), and of his voice, and adopting his own style of gestures and rhetoric, which was such as to unleash a fanatical energy that bordered on the hysterical. In his dress, the Führer avoided showiness, preferring the most ordinary of uniforms (unlike his dauphin Göring, who flaunted his corpulent body in a series of garish uniforms).

I am speaking of this period by going back to my boyhood memories, when my idea of the world was gleaned primarily from the newspaper illustrations that most struck my imagination. When I think back to the personalities who dominated world news at the time, the one who stands out from all the others in terms of his visual image is without a doubt Gandhi. Although huge numbers of anecdotes about him circulated, and he was very often caricatured, his image managed to instill the idea that there was something serious and true in him, albeit very remote from us.

In 1934 (I'm quoting dates based on my memory's outline of events; if I'm wrong, it will be easy to correct me), the Royal Italian Army changed its uniform, which until then had been the one worn in the First World War. For the Italy of the time, when many people were in the Army (in addition to a lengthy mandatory military service, you could also be "called back"), this new uniform—with a flat beret, a jacket with the collar open to show your tie, long trousers for officers in dress uniform—marked a turning point that, although it was one merely of appearance, also coincided with the country's entry into a decade of wars.

Along with the uniform, the helmet changed, too: in place of the First World War helmet, evoking, as it did, the poor infantry in the trenches, there was the drooping German-style, dome-shaped helmet, which belonged to a new age of industrial design. ("Aerodynamic" lines in cars come from the same era.) For Mussolini's iconography, this was a huge shift: the classic image of Il Duce became the one with the helmet, which looked like a metallic extension of the smooth surface of his head.

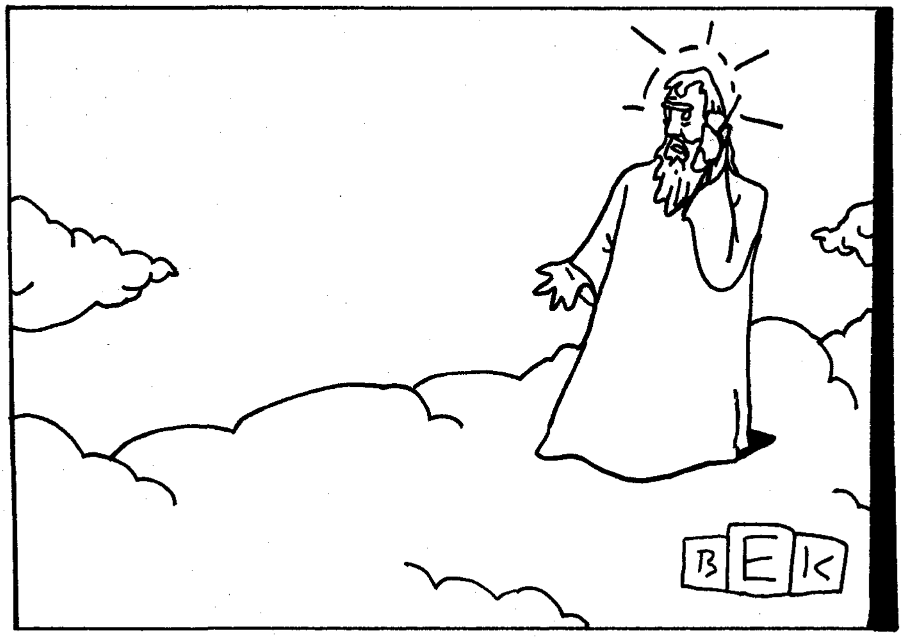
Beneath the helmet, his jaw stands out more, acquiring a decisive importance, thanks to the disappearance of the upper part of his head (including his eyes). Because his lips protruded (an unnatural position but one denoting the power of his will), his jaw stuck out in front as well as to the side. From that moment on, then, Il Duce's head seems to be made up essentially of helmet and jawbones, which counterbalance each other in volume and also counterbalance the curve of his stomach, which was just beginning to stick out. His uniform was that of Honorary Corporal of the Militia. Instead of his profile, which could look a bit squashed under the helmet, official photographs favored an almost three-quarters angle, which allowed them to capture a glimpse of his eyes beneath the helmet. What inevitably did get lost under that helmet was the thoughtful forehead, a key attribute of the Mussolini of the nineteen-twenties. His character was thus changed in a way: Il Duce as thinker was replaced by Il Duce as *condottiero.*

This is the portrait of Mussolini that could be considered canonical, and which I had before my eyes for most of my time at school, at sports, before call-up, and so on. Balancing this effigy of Il Duce there was nearly always a portrait of the King, in profile, complete with helmet, mustache, and protruding chin. King Vittorio's head was certainly much smaller than Il Duce's, but in these portraits it was enlarged so that, thanks to the angle, it appeared to have almost the same volume as that of his irreplaceable Prime Minister. I think both of them wore around their necks the Order of the Annunziata, which was a gold chain with a little plaque just where the knot of a tie would be.

Of course, there were also portraits of Il Duce bareheaded. Perhaps modelling himself on Erich von Stroheim, Mussolini was able to transform his bald head from a physical defect (like the "before" photograph in an ad for a cure for baldness) into a symbol of virile strength. His stroke of genius, again in the nineteen-thirties, was to shave off the remaining hair on his temples and neck. Also common were pictures of him in a fez with the Honorary Corporal's red braid, or in the black Party uniform, with a beret that sported an eagle with angular wings. Frequent, too, were images of him on horseback, among them the memorable one in which he brandishes the Sword of Islam at the sky.

On the rare occasions when he was portrayed in civilian dress, it was apparent that he had adopted a less formal style than previously. One summer, he was present at maneuvers in a white yachtsman's beret, cavalry boots and trousers, and a jacket that was sky blue, I think. (What I am recalling here is a color plate by Beltrame in the *Domenica del Corriere:* Il Duce is helping artillerymen drag a cannon up a slope.) Then, there were the famous shots of him in the Battle for Grain: Il Duce in his vest or bare-chested at the threshing machine, with his beret and motorcycle goggles, lifting sheaves of wheat amid farmworkers. (Farmworkers or security police? The common joke at the time was that Il Duce was congratulating a man on his excellent threshing: "Well done! What can I do to reward your labors?" "Transfer me from the police station in Rome to the one in Palermo, Duce!")

Photographs showing him in private life were rarer: there were a few family shots, and others that showed him skiing or swimming or flying an airplane. These were distributed—so it was said—because some foreign newspaper had printed rumors that he was ill.



"Sorry, I can't—I have to be everywhere."

With the conquest of Ethiopia, the cult of the Head moved more and more toward Mussolini's apotheosis. The formula used in ritual acclamations—"Hail to Il Duce! To us!"—was turned into the lengthy "Hail to Il Duce Founder of the Empire!" Jokes of the time had it that the Fascist Party Secretary, Achille Starace, was so stupid that he could not keep that phrase in his mind (even though he had invented it) and every time he was supposed to shout it he had to furtively consult the piece of paper he had written it on.

That was also the period of Starace and his anti-bourgeois "dress revolution," which consisted mainly in regularly providing new uniforms for the Party's *gerarchi:* Fascist jackets without lapels and Saharan uniforms in black, khaki, and white. . . . This was the period when Il Duce's appearance was mirrored by that of the *gerarchi* who tried to imitate him: they shaved their heads and temples to simulate virile baldness, they stuck out their chins and puffed up their necks. Others remained faithful to brilliantined hair, like Galeazzo Ciano, who did, however, try to imitate his father-in-law's speech-making poses. But Ciano was not photogenic, and his unpopularity was surpassed only by Starace's.

The war was approaching. I entered adolescence, and it is as if in those years my visual memory became less receptive than my childhood memory, when the way people looked was my main channel of contact with the world; now my mind started to fill nebulously with ideas, arguments, value judgments, and not just the external aspects of people and places.

At Munich in 1938, the two dictators played the last round in this game of images, their grimly determined expressions (that word "determined," which today is meaningless, would have been most appropriate then) contrasting with the thin, old-fashioned figure of Neville Chamberlain, with his tails, stiff collar, and umbrella. But at that point the message that got through to the masses was the one conveyed by Chamberlain's umbrella—namely, peace. And Mussolini, too, who at that point presented himself as the savior of the peace, elicited the last spontaneous cheers of the crowd.

Then came the war. Mussolini now wore the uniform of the Royal Army, campaign dress with forage cap and boots: he had had the Army confer on him the lofty title of Marshal of the Empire. On battlefronts that were still far away, young men a little older than me began to die (those born around 1915, the age group that bore the brunt of the war). Mussolini's shape, which until a little earlier had tended toward roundness, now began to grow thin, to look haggard and tense. His stomach ulcer intensified, along with the inevitability of the catastrophe. Particularly striking were the photographs of his meetings with Hitler, who now had the upper hand and did not allow him to say a word. Mussolini's uniform began to include a huge coat and a cap with a visor of distinctly Germanic style.

In the face of military defeat, the vanity of the parades was revealed even to those who had not had eyes to notice it before. The rumor that started after El-Alamein (and rumors spread rapidly through Italy)—that alongside the Italian troops retreating through the desert was the white horse that Mussolini had chosen for his triumphal entry into Alexandria—marked the end of the *condottiero* iconography.

The day was approaching when Il Duce's portraits, which had multiplied on Italian walls, would be removed from their static position as symbols of the established order and brought out into the open air, into the streets and piazzas, in a tumultuous saraband. This happened on July 25, 1943 (or, to be more precise, a day or two later), when the crowds, which could no longer be kept at bay, invaded the Case del Fascio and flung the effigies of the overthrown dictator out the windows. Everywhere, his paternal image was mocked and spat upon; there were pyres with his military portrait on top of them, plaster and bronze busts were dragged along the pavement, and his huge head became, overnight, a relic from another era and an object of fun.

Is this the end of the story? No. A month and a half later, we saw the dramatic pictures of a ghostly, ill-shaven Mussolini, who had been snatched from Campo Imperatore by Skorzeny and taken north of the Brenner, back to Hitler. Mussolini was a ghost of himself, yet he had no choice but to continue putting forth his weary image in the midst of aerial bombardment and the rattle of machine guns.

Of course, the Social Republic had its official portraits of Il Duce, with his new uniform and thin face; but I cannot get them to emerge from my memory of that time, which was so full of emotions and fears. It has to be said that at a certain point my life in town had to stop, and I found myself cut off from those images: Only by hearsay did I find out about a newsreel made by Luce a few months before the end, in which Mussolini performed one more unexpected "crowd immersion," with a speech at the Teatro Lirico in Milan, the city where his reputation for attracting crowds had been born.

At the beginning of April, in a leaflet dropped from an Allied plane to the partisans (rare gifts rained down on us from the sky), there was a caricature of Mussolini (I think it was the first I had seen in my life) by the most famous English cartoonist of the time. (I am sorry that I cannot recall his name; I could go and look it up, because the papers mentioned him recently, on the occasion of his death, but up until now I have honored my commitment to rely only on my memory, and I do not want to break this rule right at the end.) In the cartoon Benito and Adolf were trying on women's dresses, preparing to escape to Argentina.

This didn't happen. Having been at the source of so many unphotographed massacres, Mussolini was last photographed at his own. Those images are not nice to see or to remember. However, I wish that all dictators or would-be dictators, whether "progressive" or reactionary, would keep them framed on their bedside tables and look at them every night. ♦

(*Translated, from the Italian, by Martin McLaughlin.*)

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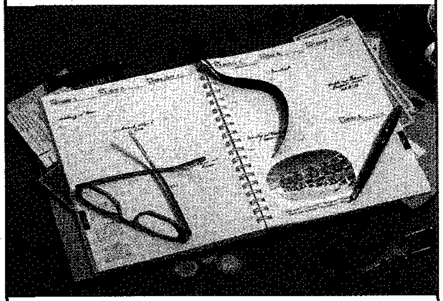

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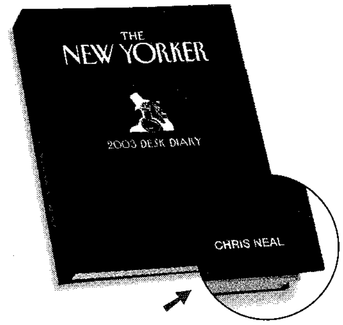

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ANNALS OF LAW

TO KILL OR NOT TO KILL

Coming to terms with capital punishment.

BY SCOTT TUROW

When Joseph Hartzler, a former colleague of mine in the United States attorney's office in Chicago, was appointed the lead prosecutor in the trial of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, he remarked that McVeigh was headed for Hell, no matter what. His job, Hartzler said, was simply to speed up the delivery. That was also the attitude evinced by the prosecutors vying to be first to try the two Beltway sniper suspects. Given the fear and fury the multiple shootings inspired, it wasn't surprising that polls showed that Americans favored imposing what Attorney General Ashcroft referred to as the "ultimate sanction." Yet despite the retributive wrath that the public seems quick to visit on particular crimes, or criminals, there has also been, in recent years, growing skepticism about the death-penalty system in general. A significant number of Americans question both the system's over-all fairness and, given the many cases in which DNA evidence has proved that the wrong person was convicted of a crime, its ability to distinguish the innocent from the guilty.

Ambivalence about the death penalty is an American tradition. When the Republic was founded, all the states, following English law, imposed capital punishment. But the humanistic impulses that favored democracy led to questions about whether the state should have the right to kill the citizens upon whose consent government was erected. Jefferson was among the earliest advocates of restricting executions. In 1846, Michigan became the first American state to outlaw capital punishment, except in the case of treason, and public opinion has continued to vacillate on the issue. Following the Second World War and the rise and fall of a number of totalitarian governments, Western European nations began abandoning capital punishment, but their example is of limited relevance to us, since our murder rate is roughly four times the rate in Europe. One need only glance at a TV screen to realize that murder remains an American preoccupation, and the concomitant questions of how to deal with it challenge contending strains in our moral thought, pitting Old Testament against New, retribution against forgiveness.

I was forced to confront my own feelings about the death penalty as one of fourteen members of a commission appointed by Governor George Ryan of Illinois to recommend reforms of the state's capital-punishment system. In the past twenty-five years, thirteen men who spent time on death row in Illinois have been exonerated, three of them in 1999. Governor Ryan declared a moratorium on executions in January, 2000, and five weeks later announced the formation of our commission. We were a diverse group: two sitting prosecutors; two sitting public defenders; a former Chief Judge of the Federal District Court; a former U.S. senator; three women; four members of racial minorities; prominent Democrats and Republicans. Twelve of us were lawyers, nine with experience as defense attorneys and eleven—including William Martin, who won a capital conviction against the mass murderer Richard Speck, in 1967—with prosecutorial backgrounds. Roberto Ramírez, a Mexican-American immigrant who built a successful janitorial business, knew violent death at first hand. His father was murdered, and his grandfather shot and killed the murderer. Governor Ryan gave us only one instruction. We were to determine what reforms, if any, would make application of the death penalty in Illinois fair, just, and accurate. In March, 2000, during the press conference at which members of the commission were introduced, we were asked who among us opposed capital punishment. Four people raised their hands. I was not one of them.

For a long time, I referred to myself as a death-penalty agnostic, although in the early seventies, when I was a student, I was reflexively against capital pun-

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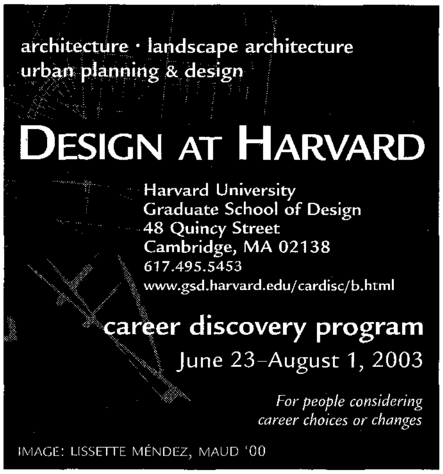
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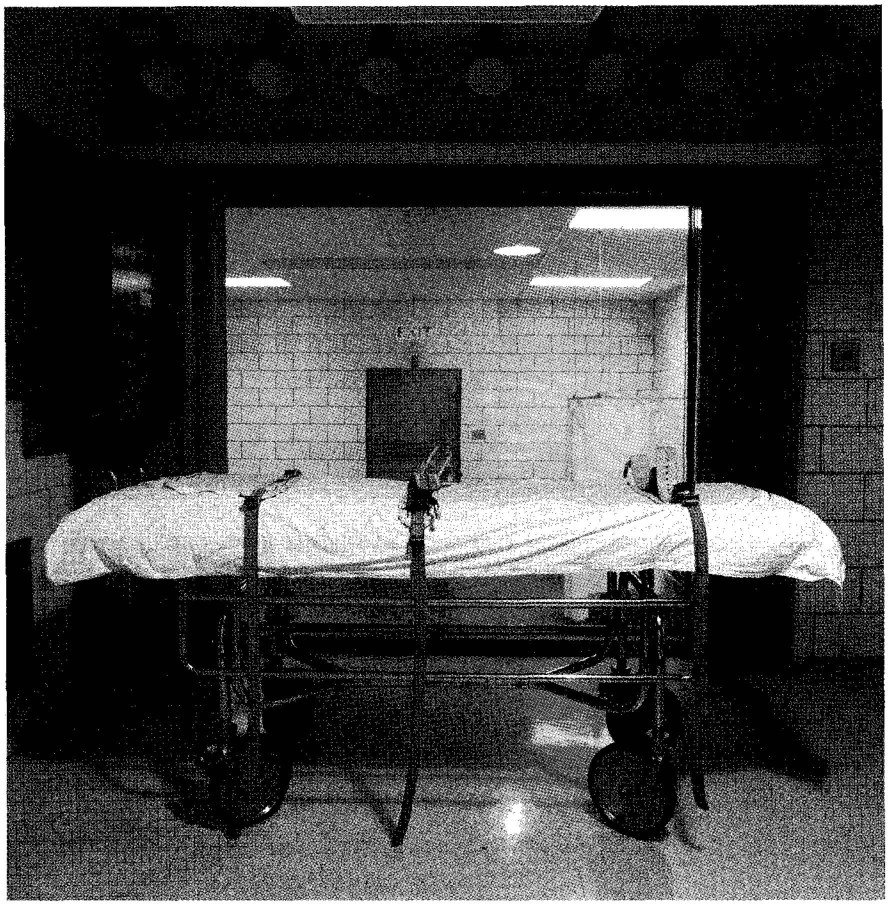
ishment. When I was an assistant U.S. attorney, from 1978 to 1986, there was no federal death penalty. The Supreme Court declared capital-punishment statutes unconstitutional in 1972, and although the Court changed its mind in 1976, the death penalty did not become part of federal law again until 1988. However, Illinois had reinstated capital punishment in the mid-seventies, and occasionally my colleagues became involved in state-court murder prosecutions. In 1984, when my oldest friend in the office, Jeremy Margolis, secured a capital sentence against a two-time murderer named Hector Reuben Sanchez, I congratulated him. I wasn't sure what I might do as a legislator, but I had come to accept that some people are incorrigibly evil and I knew that I could follow the will of the community in dealing with them, just as I routinely accepted the wisdom of the RICO statute and the mail-fraud and extortion laws it was my job to enforce.

My first direct encounter with a capital prosecution came in 1991. I was in private practice by then and had published two successful novels, which allowed me to donate much of my time as a lawyer to pro-bono work. One of the cases I was asked to take on was the appeal of Alejandro (Alex) Hernandez, who had been convicted of a notorious kidnapping, rape, and murder. In February, 1983, a ten-year-old girl, Jeanine Nicarico, was abducted from her home in a suburb of Chicago, in DuPage County. Two days later, Jeanine's corpse, clad only in a nightshirt, was found by hikers in a nearby nature preserve. She had been blindfolded, sexually assaulted several times, and then killed by repeated blows to the head. More than forty law-enforcement officers formed a task force to hunt down the killer, but by early 1984 the case had not been solved, and a heated primary campaign was under way for the job of state's attorney in DuPage County. A few days before the election, three men—Alex Hernandez, Rolando Cruz, and Stephen Buckley—were indicted.

The incumbent lost the election anyway, to a local lawyer, Jim Ryan, who took the case to trial in January, 1985. (Ryan later became the attorney general of Illinois, a position he is about to relinquish.) The jury deadlocked on Buckley, but both Hernandez and Cruz were convicted and sentenced to death. There was no physical evidence against either of them—no blood, semen, fingerprints, or other forensic proof. The state's case consisted solely of each defendant's statements, a contradictory maze of mutual accusations and demonstrable falsehoods. By the time the case reached me, seven years after the men were arrested, the charges against Buckley had been dropped and the Illinois Supreme Court had reversed the original convictions of Hernandez and Cruz and ordered separate retrials. In 1990, Cruz was condemned to death for a second time. Hernandez's second trial ended with a hung jury, but at a third trial, in 1991, he was convicted and sentenced to eighty years in prison.

Hernandez's attorneys made a straightforward pitch to me: their client, who has an I.Q. of about 75, was innocent. I didn't believe it. And, even if it was true, I couldn't envision persuading a court to overturn the conviction a second time. Illinois elects its state-court judges, and this was a celebrated case: "the case that broke Chicago's heart" was how it was sometimes referred to in the press. Nevertheless, I read the brief that Lawrence Marshall, a professor of law at Northwestern University, had filed in behalf of Cruz, and studied the transcripts of Hernandez's trials. After that, there was no question in my mind. Alex Hernandez was innocent.



Thirteen men who had been destined for the Illinois execution gurney were exonerated.

LUCINDA DEVLIN, "LETHAL INJECTION CHAMBER, STATEVILLE CORRECTIONAL CENTER, JOLIET, ILLINOIS" (1991)/PAUL RODGERS/9W

In June, 1985, another little girl, Melissa Ackerman, had been abducted and murdered in northern Illinois. Like Jeanine Nicarico, she was kidnapped in broad daylight, sexually violated, and killed in a wooded area. A man named Brian Dugan was arrested for the Ackerman murder, and, in the course of negotiating for a life sentence, he admitted that he had raped and killed Jeanine Nicarico as well.

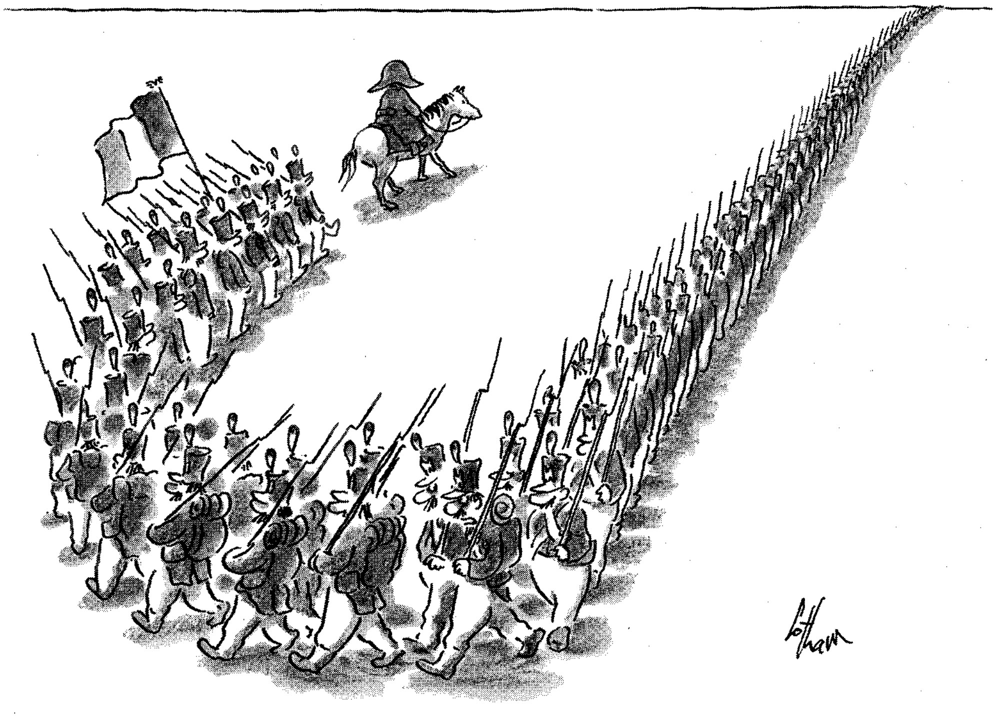
The Illinois State Police investigated Dugan's admissions about the Nicarico murder and accumulated a mass of corroborating detail. Dugan was not at work the day the girl disappeared, and a church secretary, working a few blocks from the Nicarico home, recalled a conversation with him. A tire print found where Jeanine's body was deposited matched the tires that had been on Dugan's car. He knew many details about the crime that had never been publicly revealed, including information about the interior of the Nicarico home and the blindfold applied to Jeanine.

Nevertheless, the DuPage County prosecutors refused to accept Dugan's confession. Even after Cruz's and Hernandez's second convictions were overturned in the separate appeals that Larry Marshall and I argued, and notwithstanding a series of DNA tests that excluded Cruz and Hernandez as Jeanine Nicarico's sexual assailant, while pointing directly at Dugan, the prosecutors pursued the cases. It was only after Cruz was acquitted in a third trial, late in 1995, that both men were finally freed.

Capital punishment is supposed to be applied only to the most heinous crimes, but it is precisely those cases which, because of the strong feelings of repugnance they evoke, most thoroughly challenge the detached judgment of all participants in the legal process—police, prosecutors, judges, and juries. The innocent are often particularly at risk. Most defendants charged with capital crimes avoid the death penalty by reaching a plea bargain, a process that someone who is innocent is naturally reluctant to submit to. Innocent people tend to insist on a trial, and when they get it the jury does not include anyone who will refuse on principle to impose a death sentence. Such people are barred from juries in capital cases by a Supreme Court decision, Witherspoon v. Illinois, that, some scholars believe, makes the juries more conviction-prone. In Alex Hernandez's third trial, the evidence against him was so scant that the DuPage County state's attorney's office sought an outside legal opinion to determine whether it could get the case over the bare legal threshold required to go to a jury. Hernandez was convicted anyway, although the trial judge refused to impose a death sentence, because of the paucity of evidence.

A frightened public demanding results in the aftermath of a ghastly crime also places predictable pressures on prosecutors and police, which can sometimes lead to questionable conduct. Confronted with the evidence of Brian Dugan's guilt, the prosecutors in Hernandez's second trial had tried to suggest that he and Dugan could have committed the crime together, even though there was no proof that the men knew each other. Throughout the state's case, the prosecutors emphasized a pair of shoe prints found behind the Nicarico home, where a would-be burglar—i.e., Hernandez—could have looked through a window. Following testimony that Hernandez's shoe size was about 7, a police expert testified that the shoe prints were "about size 6." Until he was directly cross-examined, the expert did not mention that he was referring to a woman's size 6, or that he had identified the tread on one of the prints as coming from a woman's shoe, a fact he'd shared with the prosecutor, who somehow failed to inform the defense.

This kind of overreaching by the prosecution occurred frequently. A special grand jury was convened after Cruz and Hernandez were freed. Three former prosecutors and four DuPage County police officers were indicted on various counts, including conspiring to obstruct justice. They were tried and—as is often the case when law-enforcement officers are charged with overzealous execution of their duties—acquitted, although the county subsequently reached a multimillion-dollar settlement in a civil suit brought by Hernandez, Cruz, and their onetime codefendant, Stephen Buckley. Despite assertions by DuPage County prosecutors that Jeanine Nicarico's killer deserves to die, Brian Dugan has never been charged with her murder, although Joseph Birkett, the state's attorney for the county, admitted in November that new DNA tests prove Dugan's role with "scientific certainty." In the past, Birkett had celebrated the acquittal of his colleagues on charges of conspiring to obstruct justice and had attacked the special prosecutor who'd brought the charges. He continues to make public statements suggesting that Cruz and Hernandez might be guilty. An ultimately unsuccessful attempt was made to demote the judge who acquitted Cruz, and last year, when the judge resigned from the bench, he had to pay for his own going-away party. In the meantime, the prosecutor who tried to



"He must have forgotten something."

incriminate Alex Hernandez with the print from a woman's shoe is now Chief Judge in DuPage County.

If these are the perils of the system, why have a death penalty? Many people would answer that executions deter others from committing murder, but I found no evidence that convinced me. For example, Illinois, which has a death penalty, has a higher murder rate than the neighboring state of Michigan, which has no capital punishment but roughly the same racial makeup, income levels, and population distribution between cities and rural areas. In fact, in the last decade the murder rate in states without the death penalty has remained consistently lower than in the states that have had executions. Surveys of criminologists and police chiefs show that substantial majorities of both groups doubt that the death penalty significantly reduces the number of homicides.

Another argument—that the death penalty saves money, because it avoids the expense of lifetime incarceration—doesn't hold up, either, when you factor in the staggering costs of capital litigation. In the United States in 2000, the average period between conviction and execution was eleven and a half years, with lawyers and courts spewing out briefs and decisions all that time.

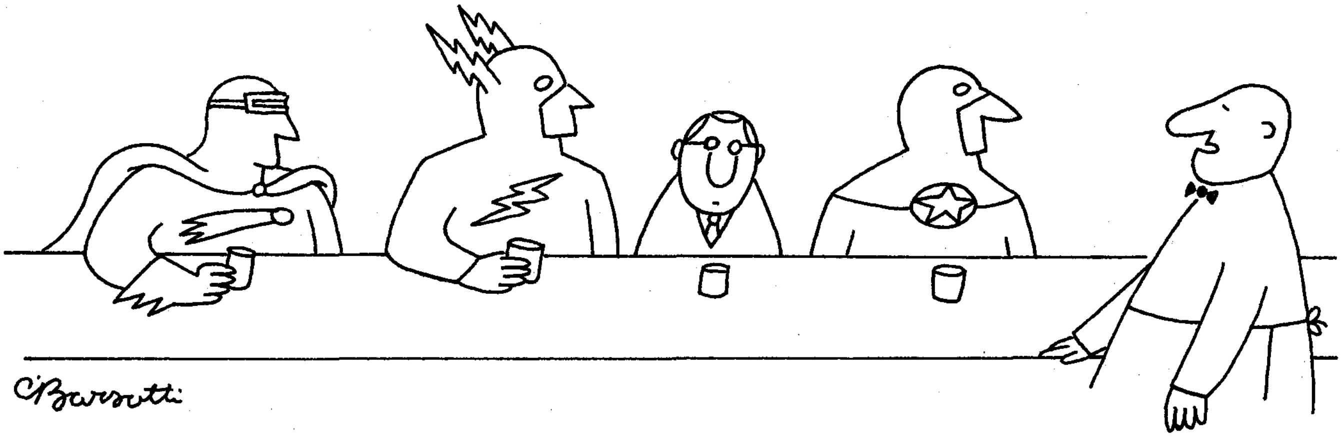
The case for capital punishment that seemed strongest to me came from the people who claim the most direct benefit from an execution: the families and friends of murder victims. The commission heard from survivors in public hearings and in private sessions, and I learned a great deal in these meetings. Death brought on by a random element like disease or a tornado is easier for survivors to accept than the loss of a loved one through the conscious will of another human being. It was not clear to me at first what survivors hoped to gain from the death of a murderer, but certain themes emerged. Dora Larson has been a victims'-rights advocate for nearly twenty years. In 1979, her ten-year-old daughter was kidnapped, raped, and strangled by a fifteen-year-old boy who then buried her in a grave he had dug three days earlier. "Our biggest fear is that someday our child's or loved one's killer will be released," she told the commission. "We want these people off the streets so that others might be safe." A sentence of life without parole should guarantee that the defendant would never repeat his crime, but Mrs. Larson pointed out several ways in which a life sentence poses a far greater emotional burden than an execution. Because her daughter's killer was under eighteen, he was ineligible for the death penalty. "When I was told life, I thought it was life," Larson said to us. "Then I get a letter saying our killer has petitioned the governor for release."

Victims' families talk a lot about "closure," an end to the legal process that will allow them to come to final terms with their grief. Mrs. Larson and others told us that families frequently find the execution of their lost loved one's killer a meaningful emotional landmark. A number of family members of the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing expressed those sentiments after they watched Timothy McVeigh die. The justice the survivors seek is the one embedded in the concept of restitution: the criminal ought not to end up better off than his victim. But the national victims'-rights movement is so powerful that victims have become virtual proprietors of the capital system, leading to troubling inconsistencies. For instance, DuPage County has long supported the Nicarico family's adamant wish for a death sentence for Jeanine's killer, but the virtually identical murder of Melissa Ackerman resulted in a life term with no possibility of parole for Brian Dugan, because Melissa's parents preferred a quick resolution. It makes no more sense to let victims rule the capital process than it would to decide what will be built on the World Trade Center site solely according to the desires of the survivors of those killed on September 11th. In a democracy, no minority, even people whose losses scour our hearts, should be entitled to speak for us all.

Governor Ryan's commission didn't spend much time on philosophical debates, but those who favored capital punishment tended to make one argument again and again: sometimes a crime is so horrible that killing its perpetrator is the only just response. I've always thought death-penalty proponents have a point when they say that it denigrates the profound indignity of murder to punish it in the same fashion as other crimes. These days, you can get life in California for your third felony, even if it's swiping a few videotapes from a Kmart. Does it vindicate our shared values if the most immoral act imaginable, the unjustified killing of another human being, is treated the same way? The issue is not revenge or retribution, exactly, so much as moral order. When everything is said and done, I suspect that this notion of moral proportion—ultimate punishment for ultimate evil—is the reason most Americans continue to support capital punishment.

This places an enormous burden of precision on the justice system, however. If we execute the innocent or the undeserving, then we have undermined, not reinforced, our sense of moral proportion. The prosecution of Alex Hernandez demonstrated to me the risks to the innocent. A case I took on later gave me experience with the problematic nature of who among the guilty gets selected for execution. One afternoon, I had assembled a group of young lawyers in my office to discuss pro-bono death-penalty work when, by pure coincidence, I found a letter in my in-box from a man, Christopher Thomas, who said he'd been convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death, even though none of the four eyewitnesses to the crime who testified had identified him. We investigated and found that the letter was accurate—in a sense. None of the eyewitnesses had identified Thomas. However, he had two accomplices, both of whom had turned against him, and Thomas had subsequently confessed three different times, the last occasion on videotape.

According to the various accounts, Chris Thomas—who is black, and was twenty-one at the time of the crime—and his two pals had run out of gas behind a strip mall in Waukegan, Illinois. They were all stoned, and they hatched a plan to roll somebody for money. Rafael Gasgonia, a thirty-nine-year-old Filipino immigrant, was unfortunate enough to step out for a smoke behind the photo shop where he worked as a delivery driver. The three men accosted



"Whoever is driving the Dodge minivan, you left your lights on."

• •

him. Thomas pointed a gun at his head, and when a struggle broke out Thomas fired once, killing Gasgonia instantly.

I was drawn to Chris Thomas's case because I couldn't understand how a parking-lot stickup gone bad had ended in a death sentence. But after we studied the record, it seemed clear to us that Thomas, like a lot of other defendants, was on death row essentially for the crime of having the wrong lawyers. He had been defended by two attorneys under contract to the Lake County public defender's office. They were each paid thirty thousand dollars a year to defend a hundred and three cases, about three hundred dollars per case. By contract, one assignment had to be a capital case. The fiscal year was nearly over, and neither of the contract lawyers had done his capital work, so they were assigned to Thomas's case together. One of them had no experience of any kind in death-penalty cases; the other had once been standby counsel for a man who was defending himself.

In court, we characterized Thomas's defense as all you would expect for six hundred dollars. His lawyers seemed to regard the case as a clear loser at trial and, given the impulsive nature of the crime, virtually certain to result in a sentence other than death. They did a scanty investigation of Thomas's background for the sentencing hearing, an effort that was hindered by the fact that the chief mitigation witness, Thomas's aunt, who was the closest thing to an enduring parental figure in his life, had herself been prosecuted on a drug charge by one of the lawyers during his years as an assistant state's attorney. As a result, Thomas's aunt distrusted the lawyers, and, under her influence, Chris soon did as well. He felt screwed around already, since he had confessed to the crime and expressed remorse, and had been rewarded by being put on trial for his life. At the sentencing hearing, Thomas took the stand and denied that he was guilty, notwithstanding his many prior confessions. The presiding judge, who had never before sentenced anybody to death, gave Thomas the death penalty.

In Illinois, some of this could not happen now. The Capital Litigation Trust Fund has been established to pay for an adequate defense, and the state Supreme Court created a Capital Litigation trial bar, which requires lawyers who represent someone facing the death penalty to be experienced in capital cases. Nonetheless, looking over the opinions in the roughly two hundred and seventy capital appeals in Illinois, I was struck again and again by the wide variation in the seriousness of the crimes. There were many monstrous offenses, but also a number of garden-variety murders. And the feeling that the system is an unguided ship is only heightened when one examines the first-degree homicides that have resulted in sentences other than death. Thomas was on death row, but others from Lake County—a man who had knocked a friend unconscious and placed him on the tracks in front of an oncoming train, for instance, and a mother who had fed acid to her baby—had escaped it.

The inevitable disparities between individual cases are often enhanced by social factors, like race, which plays a role that is not always well understood. The commission authorized a study that showed that in Illinois, you are more likely to receive the death penalty if you are white—two and a half times as likely. One possible reason is that in a racially divided society whites tend to associate with, and thus to murder, other whites. And choosing a white victim makes a murderer three and a half times as likely to be punished by a death sentence as if he'd killed someone who was black. (At least in Illinois, blacks and whites who murdered whites were given a death sentence at essentially the same rate, which has not always been true in other places.)

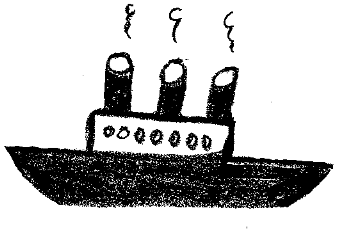
Geography also matters in Illinois. You are five times as likely to get a death sentence for first-degree murder in a rural area as you are in Cook County, which includes Chicago. Gender seems to count, too. Capital punishment for slaying a woman is imposed at three and half times the rate for murdering a man. When you add in all the uncontrollable variables—who the prosecutor and the defense lawyer are, the nature of the judge and the jury, the characteristics of the victim, the place of the crime—the results reflect anything but a clearly proportionate morality.

And execution, of course, ends any chance that a defendant will acknowledge the claims of the morality we seek to enforce. More than three years after my colleagues and I read Chris Thomas's letter, a court in Lake County resentenced him to a hundred years in prison, meaning that, with good behavior, he could be released when he is seventy-one. He wept in court and apologized to the Gasgonia family for what he had done.

Supporters of capital punishment in Illinois, particularly those in law enforcement, often use Henry Brisbon as their trump card. Get rid of the death penalty, they say, and what do you do about the likes of Henry?

On the night of June 3, 1973, Brisbon and three "rap partners" (his term) forced several cars off I-57, an interstate highway south of Chicago. Brisbon made a woman in one of the cars disrobe, and then he discharged a shotgun in her vagina. He compelled a young couple to lie down in a field together, instructed them to "make this your last kiss," and shot both of them in the back. His role in these crimes was uncovered only years later, when he confessed to an inmate working as a law librarian in the penitentiary where he was serving a stretch for rape and armed robbery. Because the I-57 killings occurred shortly after the Supreme Court declared capital punishment unconstitutional, Brisbon was not eligible for the death penalty. He was given a sentence of one thousand to three thousand years in prison, probably the longest term ever imposed in Illinois.

In October, 1978, eleven months after the sentencing, Brisbon murdered again. He placed a homemade knife to the throat of a guard to subdue him, then went with several inmates to the cell of another prisoner and stabbed him repeatedly. By the time Brisbon was tried again, in early 1982, Illinois had restored capital punishment, and he was sentenced to death. The evidence in his sentencing hearings included proof of yet another murder Brisbon had allegedly committed prior to his imprisonment, when he placed a shotgun against the face of a store clerk and blew him away. He had accumulated more than two hundred disciplinary violations while he was incarcerated, and had played a major role in the violent takeover of Stateville prison, in September, 1979. Predictably, the death sentence did not markedly improve Brisbon's conduct. In the years since he was first condemned, he has been accused of a number of serious assaults on guards, including a stabbing, and he severely injured another inmate when he threw a thirty-pound weight against his skull.



Brisbon is now held at the Tamms Correctional Center, a "super-max" facility that houses more than two hundred and fifty men culled from an Illinois prison population of almost forty-five thousand. Generally speaking, Tamms inmates are either gang leaders or men with intractable discipline problems. I wanted to visit Tamms, hoping that it would tell me whether it is possible to incapacitate people like Brisbon, who are clearly prone to murder again if given the opportunity.

Tamms is situated near the southernmost point of Illinois, farther south than parts of Kentucky. The Mississippi, a wide body of cloacal brown, floods the nearby lowlands, creating a region of green marshes along orange sandstone bluffs. Tamms stands at the foot of one of those stone outcroppings, on a vast, savannalike grassland. The terms of confinement are grim. Inmates are permitted no physical contact with other human beings. Each prisoner is held twenty-three hours a day inside a seven-by-twelve-foot block of preformed concrete that has a single window to the outside, roughly forty-two by eighteen inches, segmented by a lateral steel bar. The cell contains a stainless-steel fixture housing a toilet bowl and a sink and a concrete pallet over which a foam mattress is laid. The front of the cell has a panel of punch-plate steel pierced by a network of half-inch circles, almost like bullet holes, that permit conversation but prevent the kind of mayhem possible when prisoners can get their hands through the bars. Once a day, an inmate's door is opened by remote control, and he walks down a corridor of cells to an outdoor area, twelve by twenty-eight feet, surrounded by thirteen-foot-high concrete walls, with a roof over half of it for

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In part because the facility is not full, incarceration in Tamms costs about two and a half times as much as the approximately twenty thousand dollars a year that is ordinarily spent on an inmate in Illinois, but the facility has a remarkable record of success in reducing disciplinary infractions and assaults. George Welborn, a tall, lean man with a full head of graying hair, a mustache, and dark, thoughtful eyes, was the warden of Tamms when I visited. I talked to him for much of the day, and toward the end asked if he really believed that he could keep Brisbon from killing again. Welborn, who speaks with a southern-Illinois twang, was an assistant warden at Stateville when Brisbon led the inmate uprising there, and he testified against him in the proceedings that resulted in his death sentence. He took his time with my question, but answered, guardedly, "Yes."

I was permitted to meet Brisbon, speaking with him through the punch-plate from the corridor in front of his cell. He is a solidly built African-American man of medium height, somewhat bookish-looking, with heavy glasses. He seemed quick-witted and amiable, and greatly amused by himself. He had read all about the commission, and he displayed a letter in which, many years ago, he had suggested a moratorium on executions. He had some savvy predictions about the political impediments to many potential reforms of the capital system.

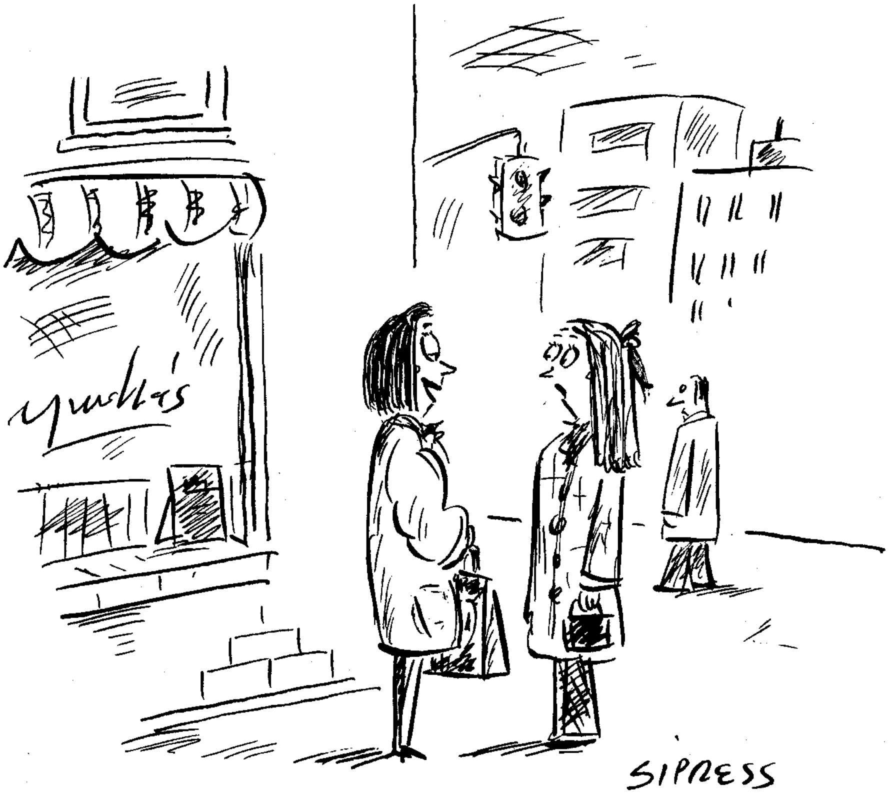
"Henry is a special case," Welborn said to me later, when we spoke on the phone. "I would be foolish to say I can guarantee he won't kill anyone again. I can imagine situations, God forbid . . . But the chances are minimized here." Still, Welborn emphasized, with Brisbon there would never be any guarantees.

I had another reason for wanting to visit Tamms. Illinois's execution chamber is now situated there. Unused for more than two years because of Governor Ryan's moratorium, it remains a solemn spot, with the sterile feel of an operating theatre in a hospital. The execution gurney, where the lethal injection is administered, is covered by a crisp sheet and might even be mistaken for an examining table except for the arm paddles that extend from it and the crisscrossing leather restraints that strike a particularly odd note in the world of Tamms, where virtually everything else is of steel, concrete, or plastic.

Several years ago, I attended a luncheon where Sister Helen Prejean, the author of "Dead Man Walking," delivered the keynote address. The daughter of a prominent lawyer, Sister Helen is a powerful orator. Inveighing against the death penalty, she looked at the audience and repeated one of her favorite arguments: "If you really believe in the death penalty, ask yourself if you're willing to inject the fatal poison." I thought of Sister Helen when I stood in the death chamber at Tamms. I felt the horror of the coolly contemplated ending of the life of another human being in the name of the law. But if John Wayne Gacy, the mass murderer who tortured and killed thirty-three young men, had been on that gurney, I could, as Sister Helen would have it, have pushed the button. I don't think the death penalty is the product of an alien morality, and I respect the right of a majority of my fellow-citizens to decide that it ought to be imposed on the most horrific crimes.

The members of the commission knew that capital punishment would not be abolished in Illinois anytime soon. Accordingly, our formal recommendations, many of which were made unanimously, ran to matters of reform. Principal among them was lowering the risks of convicting the innocent. Several of the thirteen men who had been on death row and were then exonerated had made dubious confessions, which appeared to have been coerced or even invented. We recommended that all interrogations of suspects in capital cases be videotaped. We also proposed altering lineup procedures, since eyewitness testimony has proved to be far less trustworthy than I ever thought while I was a prosecutor. We urged that courts provide pretrial hearings to determine the reliability of jailhouse snitches, who have surfaced often in Illinois's capital cases, testifying to supposed confessions in exchange for lightened sentences.

To reduce the seeming randomness



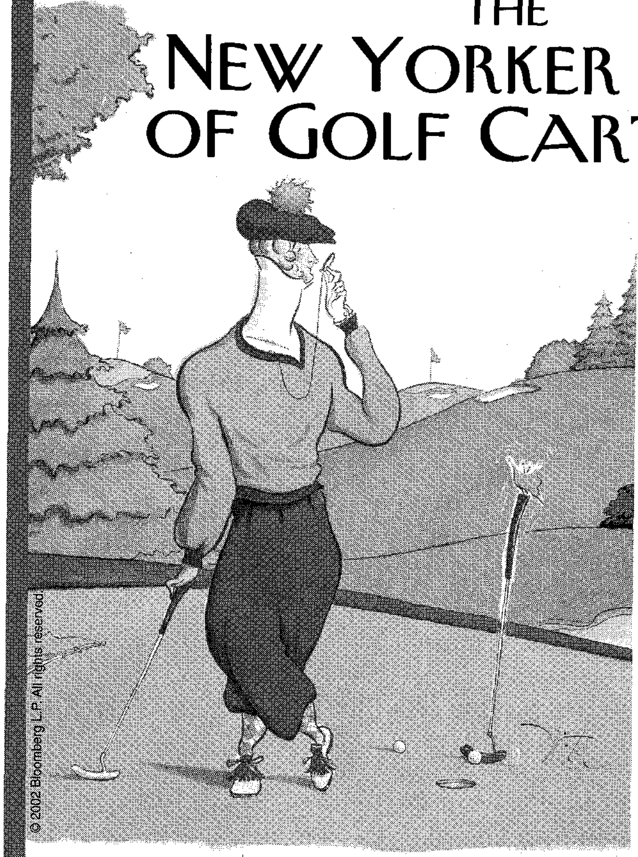
"What I love about our friendship is the way we never see or speak to each other."

with which some defendants appear to end up on death row, we proposed that the twenty eligibility criteria for capital punishment in Illinois be trimmed to five: multiple murders, murder of a police officer or firefighter, murder in a prison, murder aimed at hindering the justice system, and murder involving torture. Murders committed in the course of another felony, the eligibility factor used in Christopher Thomas's case, would be eliminated. And we urged the creation of a statewide oversight body to attempt to bring more uniformity to the selection of death-penalty cases.

To insure that the capital system is something other than an endless maze for survivors, we recommended guaranteed sentences of life with no parole when eligible cases don't result in the death penalty. And we also outlined reforms aimed at expediting the post-conviction review and clemency processes.

Yet our proposals sidestepped the ultimate question. One fall day, Paul Simon, the former U.S. senator who was one of the commission's chairs and is a longtime foe of the death penalty, forced us to vote on whether Illinois should have a death penalty at all. The vote was an expression of sentiment, not a formal recommendation. What was our best advice to our fellow-citizens, political realities aside? By a narrow majority, we agreed that capital punishment should not be an option.

I admit that I am still attracted to a death penalty that would be applied to horrendous crimes, or that would provide absolute certainty that the likes of Henry Brisbon would never again satisfy their cruel appetites. But if death is available as a punishment, the furious heat of grief and rage that these crimes inspire will inevitably short-circuit any capital system. Now and then, we will execute someone who is innocent, while the fundamental equality of each survivor's loss creates an inevitable emotional momentum to expand the categories for death-penalty eligibility. Like many others who have wrestled with capital punishment, I have changed my mind often, driven back and forth by the errors each position seems to invite. Yet after two years of deliberation, I seem to have finally come to rest. When Paul Simon asked whether Illinois should have a death penalty, I voted no. ♦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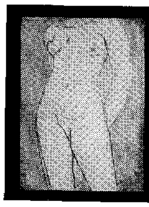
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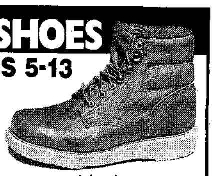
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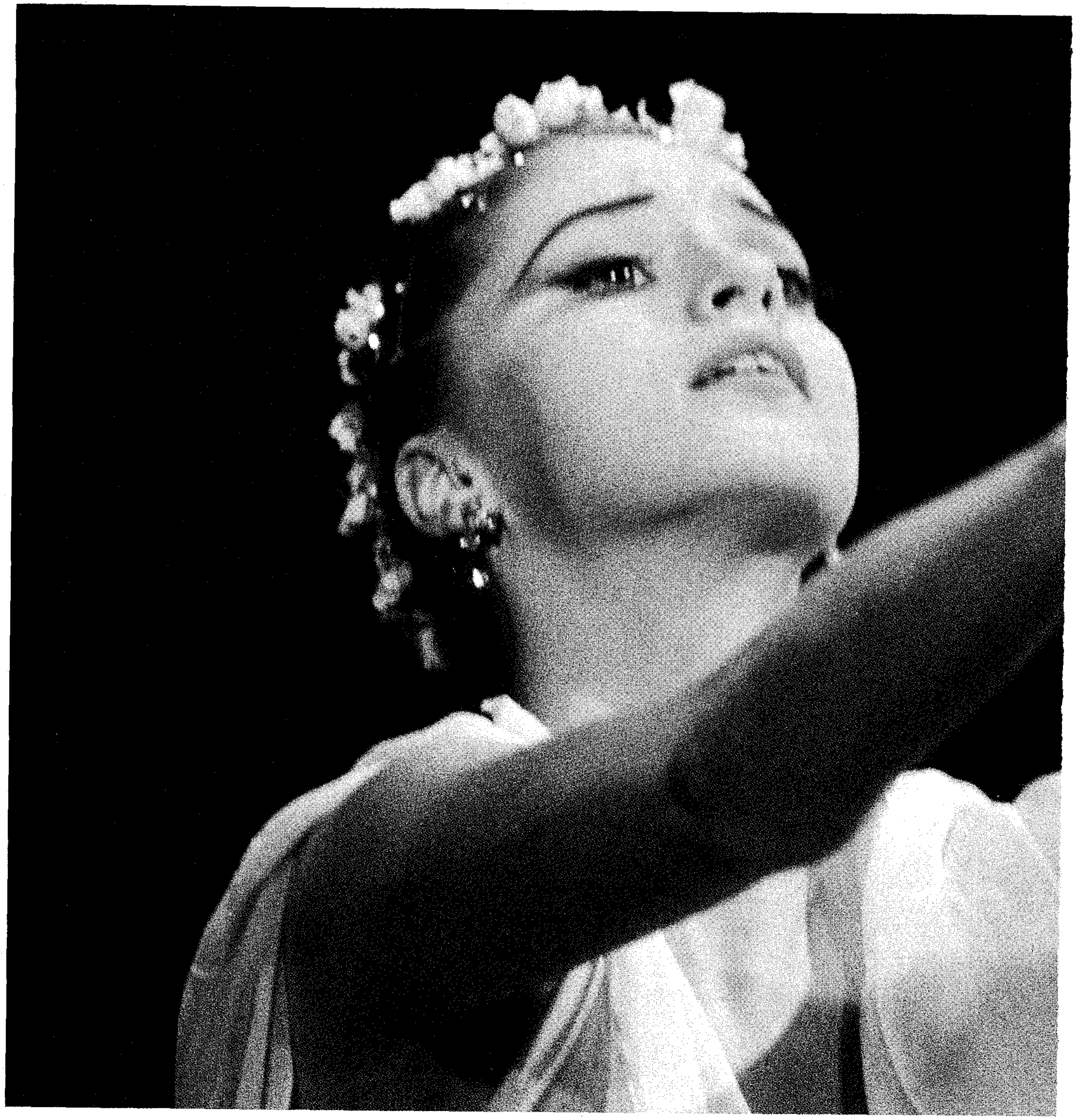
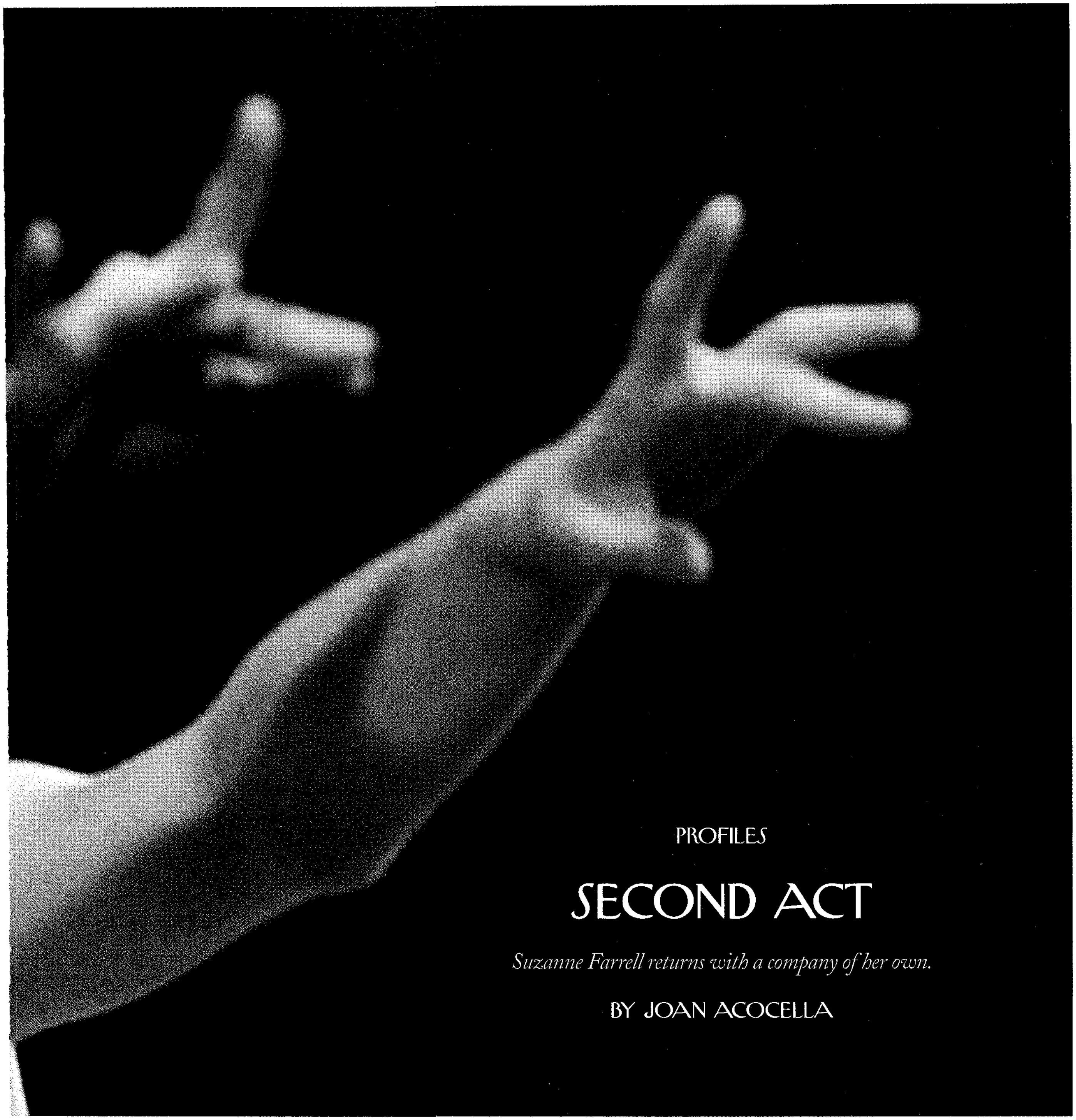


MARTHA SWOPE/TIMEPIX

On a November night in 1989, Suzanne Farrell gave her final performance with New York City Ballet, the company that she had joined twenty-eight years earlier. One last time, her hair hung with jewels, she danced the long, strange enchanted-ballroom solo that George Balanchine had created for her in "Vienna Waltzes," and once again, on the great stage of the New York State Theatre, she gathered every inch of the space into the passionate logic of her dancing. When she exited, forty dancers—the entire ensemble—entered, and they seemed small compared with her. She rejoined them for the finale, and then it was over: the ballet, and the career. Farrell bowed to the company, and they to her. Peter Martins, N.Y.C.B.'s director, came on and presented her with a bouquet. Next came Lincoln Kirstein, who had founded the company with Balanchine, in 1948. Kirstein handed Farrell more flowers, and burst into tears. She took his arm and laid her head on his shoulder. Then the two of them walked offstage together, leaving the fans hollering.

Farrell was the most influential American ballerina of the late twentieth century. Others before her had done what could be called modernist ballet dancing—lean and wild, as opposed to the plump and decorous nineteenth-century model—but Farrell, under Balanchine's tutelage, carried that project further than anyone else. What she performed was still classical ballet—she got out there with her hair in a bun and



PROFILES

SECOND ACT

Suzanne Farrell returns with a company of her own.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

did glissade, assemblé—but in her the classical style seemed to have sunk to the bones of the dancing. The flesh was something else, an awakened force. When she bent down into an arabesque penchée, you thought she would never stop. (She was the first dancer I ever saw touch her forehead to her knee in penchée.) When she executed a triple pirouette, and tilted as she did it, and then—without ever righting herself—plunged directly into the next jackknife or nosedive, you thought the walls were falling in. As Arlene Croce wrote, Farrell "made audiences sweat."

One could scarcely believe that a power so huge had come to an end. But it had, as ballet dancing does for most people, however gifted, in their forties. (Farrell was forty-four, and had already had the first of two hip-replacement operations.) And there was some comfort in the thought that she might now have time to coach New York City Ballet's younger dancers. But the company chose not to use her, and so she took her skills elsewhere. Long before Balanchine died, his work had become a staple of the American ballet repertory. After his death, many more troupes, European as well as American, began calling the Balanchine Trust, the organization that licenses his ballets and

Farrell in "Don Quixote," the ballet George Balanchine made for her in 1965. That year, she danced the lead in twenty-eight ballets.

sends répétiteurs, or rehearsal directors, to stage them. As one of the répétiteurs, Farrell went to Moscow, Stuttgart, Copenhagen, Paris, Seattle, Miami, Cincinnati. In 2000, she accepted a professorship at Florida State University, in Tallahassee, and began teaching there for part of every year. At times, it seemed that the only place she wasn't working was New York.

Actually, she was still in New York, because that's where she lived, with her dog, Tex, in a rambling apartment a few blocks from the New York State Theatre. Between assignments, she could occasionally be spotted in the grocery store, or walking Tex on Broadway. But these were like Elvis sightings. In terms of the New York ballet scene, which she had been instrumental in creating, she was gone. Furthermore, wherever she went, she was never there for long. She had no troupe to call home, no base from which to launch a sustained act of teaching. She had said repeatedly that she had no thought of running a ballet company of her own, nor did she seem to have the right personality for such a job. She was known to be introverted, narrow, focussed—not your standard company director's profile. Once, a journalist asked her what she did between gigs. She answered that she was very good at doing nothing. She played solitaire, she said, and read Robert Ludlum novels.

In 1992, James Wolfensohn, who is now the president of the World Bank, sat in his office thinking about the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in Washington. Wolfensohn, an Australian who had become the chairman of the center's board of trustees two years earlier, had spent the nineteen-seventies and eighties working as an investment banker in New York, and there he frequently went to the ballet. His favorite company was New York City Ballet, and his favorite dancer was Suzanne Farrell. Although Farrell was still technically on staff at N.Y.C.B., "I knew she wasn't being effectively used," Wolfensohn told me. So he called her to see if she would have lunch with him. He took her to the Four Seasons—"I felt as though I were having lunch with an angel," he recalls—and he asked her if she might make some contribution at the Kennedy Center. They started small. Early in 1993, Farrell taught a group of local teen-agers at the center for four weekends. "But then a buzz started," Derek Gordon, the center's vice-president for education, says. Within a few years, Farrell was running a three-week summer session, for which students auditioned across the country.

At the end of the 1994 summer session, Farrell staged a recital for her students, and put together a ballet for them. Wolfensohn liked it: "So I asked her, 'Why don't you see if you could do a little program with professional dancers?' " Farrell had said she had no intention of running a ballet company, and Wolfensohn insists that he had no thought of getting her to do so. Nevertheless, in 1995 Farrell staged two programs of Balanchine's work at the Kennedy Center, to effusive reviews. In 1999, she again mounted a two-program season, this time adding pieces by other choreographers—Jerome Robbins, Maurice Béjart—and she took her show on tour: five weeks, nine cities. By 2000, the group had a name, the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. By 2002, it had twenty-four dancers and a booking agent. No one can quite say how it happened, but Farrell seems to be directing a ballet company.

This year and last, I spent time watching Farrell do the two main things that she now does for a living: teach ballet to advanced students and coach professionals in Balanchine's ballets. The first day I visited her class at the Kennedy Center, she entered quietly through the studio's back door. She is fifty-seven now, but she hasn't changed much. She doesn't seem as tall as before, but that's because she's no longer standing on her toes. (On point, she was six feet one. On flat feet, she is five feet six and a half.) In certain respects, she looks like a regular, hard-working ballet teacher. Her long brown hair is clipped back in a ponytail. She wears a baggy sweater, plus a little skirt. Still, you know you're looking at a ballerina. Indeed, offstage, the features that made her body perfect for the stage are more striking. The famous feet, with the curved arches—can you walk down a street on those things? The big eyes, the long neck seem lonely for their proper context: the lights, the tiara. The beautiful face that once housed a mystery now opens its mouth to tell other people how to make a mystery. This takes getting used to.

So do her classes, and her rehearsals. In watching Farrell work, I had expected, above all, to hear about steps. The plumb-line penchées, the cyclonic pirouettes: these, I thought, were what she would show her students how to do. She didn't. At times, it seemed that she didn't care about steps. Or, rather, that she trusted the dancers' ability to do them, and so she went straight to her subject, their thinking about the steps.

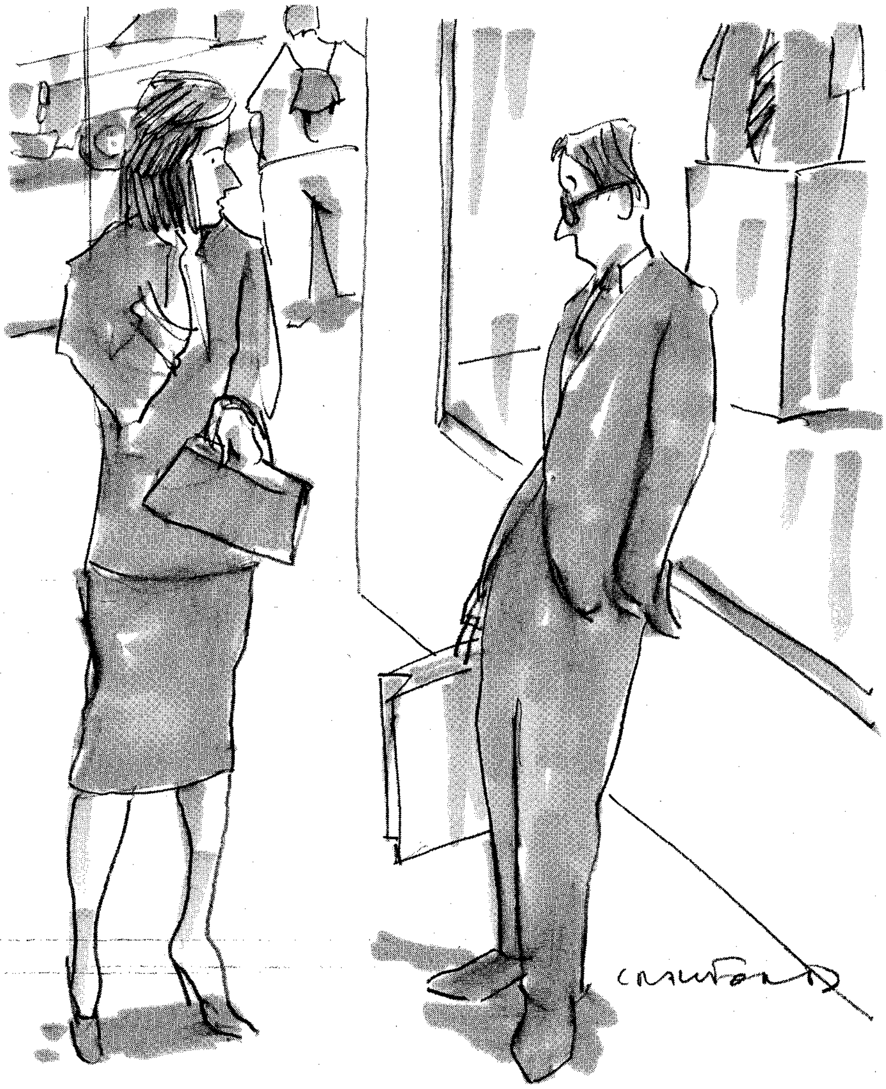
A constant theme of her teaching is symbol-making. Susan Jaffe, formerly a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, told me about working with Farrell on "Mozartiana" for the 1995 season at the Kennedy Center. Balanchine made "Mozartiana" two years before his death, and many people believe that it is about his death. The music for the first section is Tchaikovsky's resetting of Mozart's "Ave, Verum Corpus," a musical prayer, and as the curtain opens the lead woman (Farrell in the original), dressed in black, comes forward in bourrée—the gliding-on-point step—meanwhile raising her arms very slowly. In learning the ballet, Jaffe was having trouble with the arms, so Farrell spoke to her. She told her that Balanchine had taken those arms from a statue of the Virgin Mary in the Church of the Blessed Sacrament on West Seventy-first Street, a few blocks from where he lived. Jaffe, who also lived near there, knew the statue, which is actually a rather ordinary marble Madonna, but with lovely arms, which she holds out to us softly, as if she were giving us something nice. No surprises here: death, prayer, Madonna, mercy. And maybe it was the memory of the statue which enabled Jaffe, when she finally performed "Mozartiana," to use her arms as wonderfully as she did. I don't think so, though. "In that arm movement," Jaffe said to me later, "you bring your fingers together, and then open your arms. So this movement opens up into art and history—the neighborhood Balanchine lived in, and what he saw, and the history of the world." What Jaffe got from Farrell, it seems, was not so much a description as a suggestion, an idea: of something small, and one's own, opening out into something great, which then becomes one's own, too. With Farrell, Jaffe says, you work "from pictures in your mind, rather than 'Is this a good fifth position?' "

Another thing that Farrell constantly asks for, particularly from her young students, is variety. One day, I watched her work on developpé, the step in which the dancer lifts her knee, usually to the side, and then unfolds her leg in the air. Developpé is a major "show" step, the show being how high the dancer can push the leg. But Farrell doesn't care about the height. What does "developpé" mean? she asks the class. It means development, she says, like a Polaroid photograph developing, going from black-and-white to all those colors. "And I want to see all those colors"—a different energy at every stage of the leg's rising. Before it rises, too, please: "I want to see the idea, emanating from you, that you're about to do developpé." She works this way with every phrase. She wants their dancing to be oblique, shaped, shaded, nuanced.

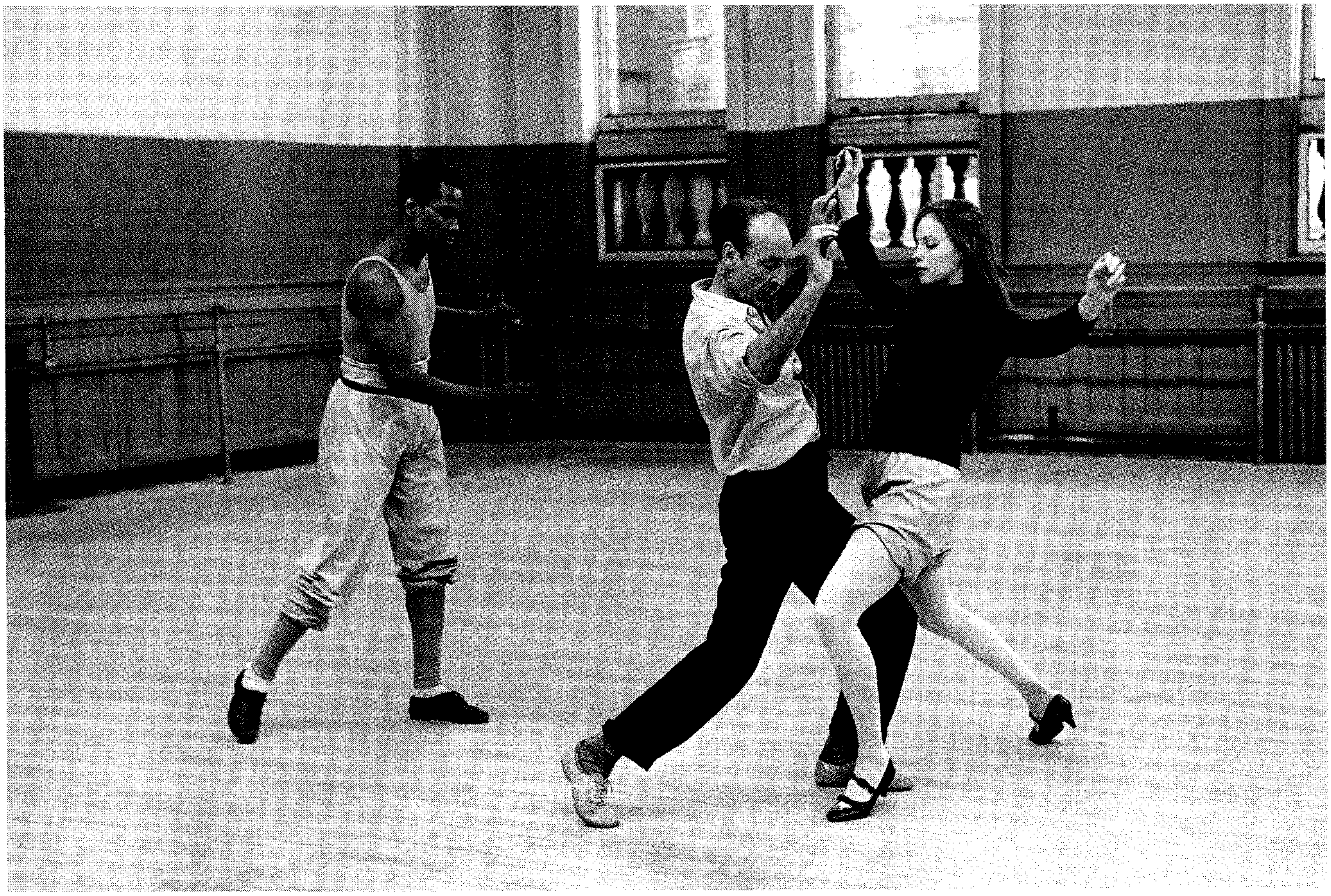
At the same time, she wants it big and forceful. "To do a turn, and make it interesting, you don't just turn," she said to me. "You have to gather all the space inside your leg" (here, as dancers do, she used her hands, gathering into the crook of her arm what seemed like all the air in the room) "and then" (scooping strenuously now) "expel it. I mean, this" (the mighty scoop again) "is more interesting than this" (a light little turn of the arm). "Both of them are the same movement—I turned both times—but the first one was more interesting, because I inhabited more space." That's what she wants from her students, and they labor for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon to produce it. When the afternoon class is over, they stagger down the corridor, bumping into walls.

Farrell, as a dancer, had certain technical shortcomings—she wasn't a jumper, and she couldn't really do allegro (fast, small, fine-cut steps)—but no one in the world was more musical. Her connection to music seemed to be something acutely neurological. ("Even in rehearsal," she says, "when the pianist would start to play, I would get nervous, agitated.") As she sees it, music and dance are much the same thing. "There's sound in movement," she says, and space in sound. The dancer's job is to show—or make—the relation between the two: "There's a clarinet cadenza in 'Mozartiana' that's very hard to count, but say you count it out, and it's thirteen counts. So you tell yourself, 'All right, I've got time for three pirouettes.' But what about the music's internal time? What if one note is louder, so it needs a bigger response from you, and that takes longer? What if the clarinettist doesn't have as much breath that night, so the music sort of fades in and out? You can't really dance to counts, or I couldn't. On any given night, at any given point, I didn't know if I was going to do three turns, or two, or four. You have to dance in the drama of the music, in *that* timing, at *that* moment."

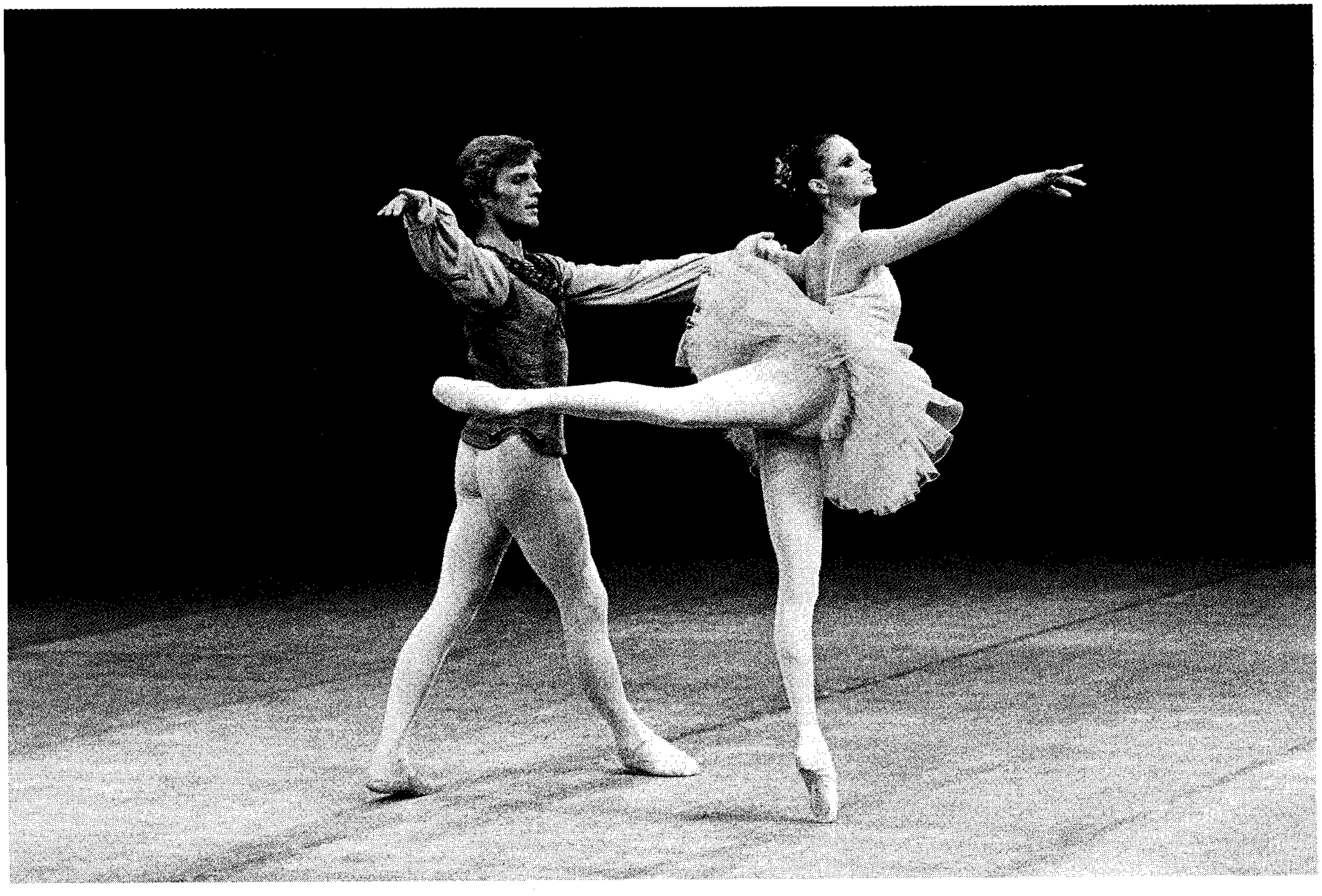
Some people say that musicality can't be taught, but Farrell teaches it. "I would be remiss if I didn't," she told me. According to her, kids these days have no musical sensitivity. "They don't know a waltz from a march," she says, wonderingly. "When the music changes from three-four to four-four, they don't hear it." And so she makes them hear it. She claps, she taps, she chants, she waves her arms. She also assigns mind-bending rhythms. "She'd give you *fives*," Lydia Walker, one of her students, says. "Or the count would be in three, but the music would be in four. It fit at the end—the phrase was twelve counts, so the pianist did three fours, and we



"I appreciate the overture, Nick, but I'm trying to cut down on after-work cocktails with Mr. Wrong."



Farrell and Balanchine, with Arthur Mitchell, in a rehearsal of "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," in 1968.



Farrell and Peter Martins performing Balanchine's "La Source," in 1981.

did four threes—but it wasn't easy."

Hard as Farrell's class is, it's partly about joy. She says that in the ten-year grind of pre-professional ballet training many dancers sacrifice their sense of pleasure in the quest for a kind of featureless perfection, and also that they spend too much time comparing themselves with others: "I say to them, 'There will always be a dancer who turns more times than you, whose leg goes higher, jumps better—prettier, thinner, something. But no one has what you have—your eyes, your neck, how you carry yourself. So you'd better start liking that, and showing it.' " Again and again, she tells the dancers to stop looking in the studio mirror. "I say to them, 'You know how there's a payer and a payee, and an employer and an employee? Well, there's a looker and a lookee, and you can't be both. You can't be an honest performer and a spectator at the same time.' If you want to become a boring dancer, that's how to do it, by trying to tell the audience what to see."

Very rarely do the students produce, that minute, the effect that she is asking for. Often, they dance a little worse. They had a thing they had mastered, which they thought made them look good. She has taken it away. She doesn't require them to solve the problem immediately. Even less does she expect the dancers she is coaching to do, in the studio, what they will do onstage. She doesn't believe you can rehearse a ballet; all you can do is "prepare." When she was dancing, she says, she rarely practiced right before the curtain went up: "I'd get onstage during the intermission, and I'd walk around and I'd feel my shoes and just be there, and I'd see people around me practicing double pirouettes and all kinds of things. Sometimes I'd think, Oh boy, maybe I should be doing something. But, you know, I rarely missed things in performance. The people who were practicing before—they were the ones who missed things. Because in performance you're not the same as before. Before is over. The performance is now."

MARTHA SWOPE/TIMEPIX

Farrell didn't invent this philosophy. "Now!" Balanchine used to say to his dancers. "What are you saving it for? Do it now!" As a boy in St. Petersburg, Balanchine lived through the Russian Revolution and civil war, and the privations of that period left a permanent mark on him. By the time he graduated from school, he was spitting blood. Later, after he escaped to Europe, in 1924, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and spent three months in a sanatorium. For years afterward, he was assailed by afternoon fevers and sweats. "You know, I am really a dead man," he said to one of his early dancers. "I was supposed to die and I didn't, so now everything I do is second chance. . . . I don't look back, I don't look forward. Only now."

He applied that rule to his company. He was convinced that you could not really change a dancer. All you could do was develop what she already had. In choreographing a ballet, he would often say to the people he had assembled, "Well, what can you do?" Then, if he liked what they showed him, he would work it up, and put it in, and let the dancer complete it. Farrell recalls, "Sometimes he'd say to me, 'Oh, Suzi, you know what I mean.' And I did." Not all the dancers wanted that kind of license, but those who did were the ones who tended to grow. No twentieth-century choreographer had a more glorious record of developing ballerinas—that is, female stars—than Balanchine did. Farrell was only one. Before her came Tamara Toumanova, Marie-Jeanne, Mary Ellen Moylan, Maria Tallchief, Tanaquil LeClercq, Diana Adams, Allegra Kent, Violette Verdy, Patricia McBride. After her there were Gelsey Kirkland, Merrill Ashley, and Darci Kistler. Balanchine's assembling of this splendid lineup is sometimes regarded as a Russian mystery, but there was no mystery. He just found out what these women *wanted* to do, and made it as interesting as he could.

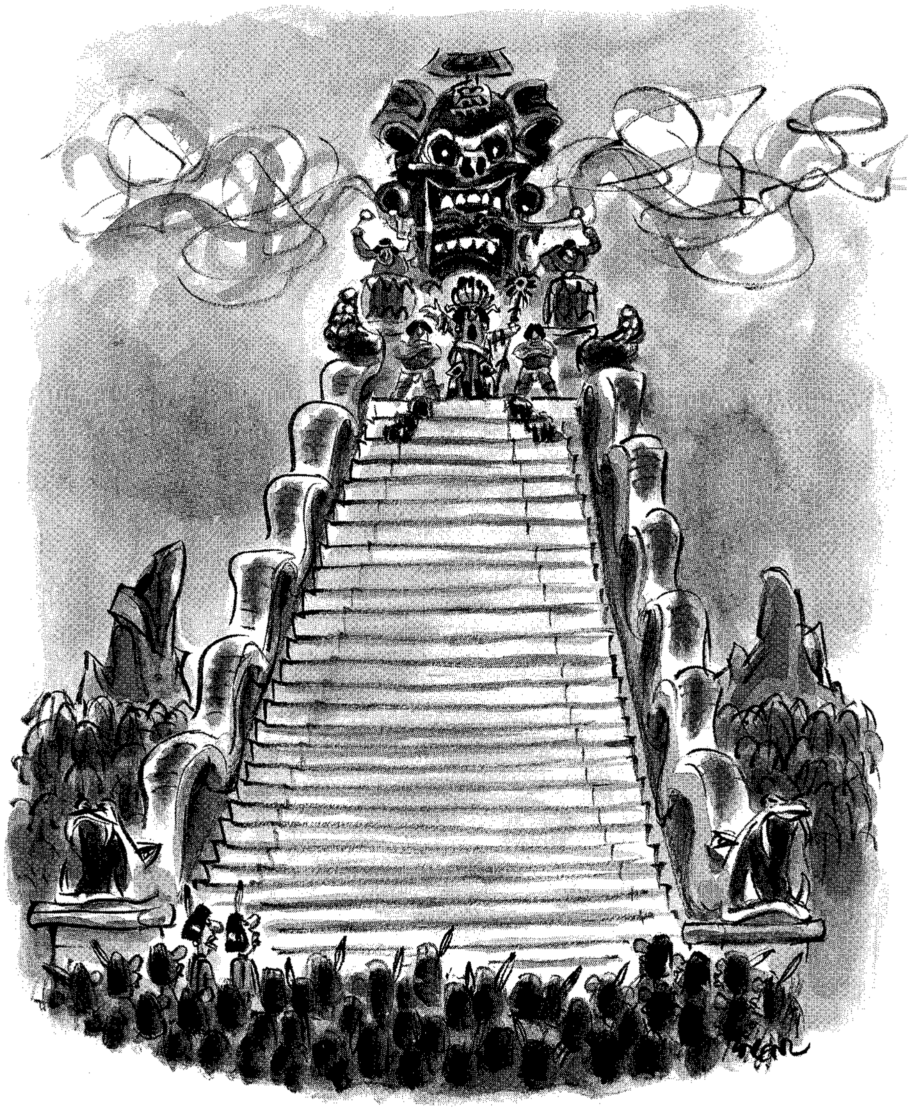
Then he pushed them to make it fresh, vital. Balanchine never scolded his dancers for falling. He was more likely to scold them for not placing themselves at the risk of falling. "Zombies," he would say to his class on mornings when they seemed to be dancing by rote. To wake them up, he would speak in symbols, tell jokes. "Hands! . . . Hands are important. . . . Hands will kill you. . . . Aaarrgh!" he said to the class, and strangled himself enthusiastically. Anything to upset their ballet-student calculations. Another means to that end was the notorious difficulty of his class. (About half his company couldn't hack it, and went to other teachers.) His purpose was of course to extend his dancers' range, but also to throw them off the idea of perfection. He forbade them to look in the mirror. "I'm the mirror," he said.

In service of the same goal, maximum spontaneity, he never wanted the dancers to have to do, onstage (class was different), anything they were visibly struggling with. When the cast of a ballet changed, he often changed the choreography to fit the new performers. As a result, many of his ballets exist in a number of versions. This drives dance historians crazy, but it didn't bother Balanchine. He told people that he did not see his work as permanent. "When I go, it goes," he said.

What this comes down to is an aesthetic of improvisation, and, while that accorded with his philosophy of life, it was also a matter of necessity. Balanchine came to the United States in 1933 to found a ballet company, but he didn't get it going until fifteen years later. There were various reasons for that: no money, no audience. (Before him, there was basically no American tradition of classical ballet.) But the worst problem was no dancers. By 1946, he finally had what might be called the first "Balanchine ballerina," Tanaquil LeClercq, who had been trained from childhood in his school, the School of American Ballet. He was very pleased; eventually, he even married her. Then, when LeClercq was twenty-seven, she contracted polio, which left her paralyzed from the waist down. He turned to others—Diana Adams, Allegra Kent—and developed them patiently. But Kent kept taking leaves in order to have a family; Adams was unconfident and injury-prone, and she, too, was trying to have a baby. In 1963, Balanchine created on Adams a Stravinsky ballet, "Movements for Piano and Orchestra." Then, shortly before the première, she found out that she was pregnant, and withdrew. Balanchine was very unhappy, and said that he was going to cancel the ballet. But Jacques d'Amboise, who was cast as the male lead in "Movements," did not want the ballet cancelled. He had a favorite dancer in the corps de ballet—Suzanne Farrell, seventeen years old—and he suggested that she could learn Adams's role. Balanchine was skeptical, but he said to go ahead and try.

In her 1990 memoir, "Holding On to the Air," co-written with Toni Bentley, Farrell describes what happened next. D'Amboise took her to Adams's apartment. Adams lay on the couch, covered with a blanket. D'Amboise pushed the coffee table aside, and on a polished parquet floor (impossible to dance on), with no music ("I was told to listen for 'the big boom,' 'the second crash,' 'the sixth silent note,' or 'the sort of pretty music after the messy music' ") but with only Adams and d'Amboise "grunting, clapping, and singing," Farrell learned some version of the choreography. She improvised, and then d'Amboise took her to Balanchine, and Balanchine improvised—remade the ballet for Farrell. When it was premièred, a few days later, critics said that there was a remarkable new dancer at New York City Ballet.

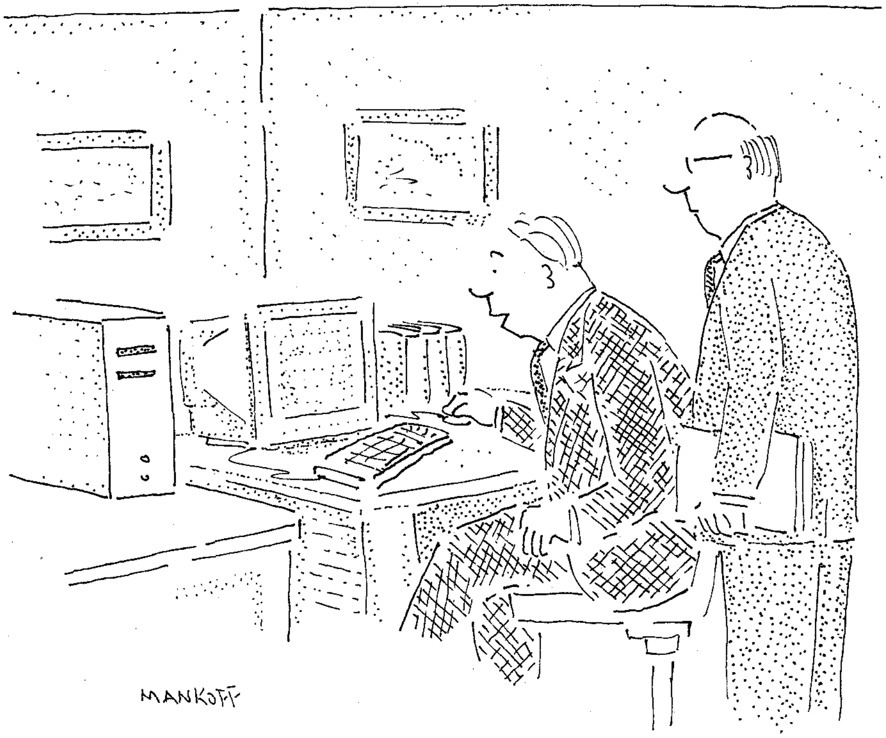
Roberta Sue Ficker, always known in her childhood as Suzi (hence "Suzanne"—the "Farrell" came out of a phone book), was born in 1945. Her father drove a meat-delivery truck; her mother was a nurse's aide. With their three daughters—Suzi, Donna (or Sug, short for Sugar), and Beverly—they lived in a four-room house in Mount Healthy, Ohio, outside Cincinnati. When Suzi was nine, her mother asked her father for a divorce. Farrell says she didn't mind much: "It was good not to hear their fights anymore." The girls carried on—Suzi and Sug as dance students, Bev as a piano student—under the leadership of their resourceful mother, Donna Holly. (She had reverted to her maiden name.) "Stage mothers" have a bad reputation, but behind most great ballerinas stand rugged examples of that species, and Holly is a case in point. One day when Suzi was fourteen, word went around her dance class that a scout from New York's School of American Ballet, Diana Adams, was coming to give out scholarships. Suzi auditioned and didn't get picked. Adams found her graceful but weak. After the audition, however, Suzi's teacher mentioned to Adams that Holly was thinking of moving the girls to New York, and Adams said that if they ever got there Suzi should go for a second audition, at the school. When this was repeated to Holly, she sold the family's furniture, found an apartment for Sug (who was eighteen and wanted to stay in Cincinnati), and set out for New York with the two younger girls and a U-Haul containing Bev's piano. On the day Suzi turned fifteen, she was auditioned at S.A.B., by Balanchine, and was given her scholarship. The family moved into the Ansonia, a Beaux-Arts pile, home to many theatrical types, on upper Broadway. For three women and a baby grand, they had one room. They cooked on an illegal hot plate or ate at the Horn & Hardart Automat across the street. They also used the toilet at the Automat; the one in their room usually didn't work. There was only one bed. Suzi and Bev slept in it at night; Holly, now working as a private-duty nurse, occupied it during the day. When the girls came home from school, their mother was asleep. "We had to do our homework by candlelight," Farrell recalls in her book. "Even with the scholarships"—Bev got one, too, at the Manhattan School of Music—"there was very little cash, and Mother often worked twenty-hour shifts, arriving home completely exhausted."



"Overly scripted."

In 1961, shortly after she turned sixteen, Farrell joined N.Y.C.B., and less than two years later she took Diana Adams's place in "Movements for Piano and Orchestra." Before "Movements," Balanchine had paid her some notice; after it, he seemed to notice nobody else. The following season, he made a ballet, "Meditation," to Tchaikovsky. As the curtain opened, an older man (d'Amboise) was seen kneeling in despair on a darkened stage. In came a sort of vision: Farrell, her hair down, in a white chiffon dress. She danced with him, their energy and emotion mounting—triple pirouettes, hair flying—until at last, still reaching out her arms toward him, she stepped back into the wings, and he knelt again in grief. "Meditation" was not just a tribute; it was a public announcement. Balanchine was in love, and the fact that he was forty-two years older than Farrell made no difference to him.

In the fourteen months after "Meditation," Farrell was given fifteen additional leading roles. Balanchine also went on making new ballets for her, at least one per year, sometimes three or four. In 1965, he created a three-act "Don Quixote" in which she appeared as a servant girl, a shepherdess, a gypsy, the Virgin Mary, and of course Dulcinea. Let me count the ways, Balanchine was saying. At the first performance, he himself stepped into the role of Don Quixote, and fell at her feet. Soon afterward, the two of them appeared together on the cover of *Life*. In the accompanying story, Balanchine was quoted as saying, "Everything a man does he does for his ideal woman." After the first performance of "Don Quixote," Farrell said, she and Balanchine went to Dunkin' Donuts and talked about how happy they were and "how life would go on like this forever."



"No, I'm not backing up our files—I'm just assuming that the F.B.I. is making copies."

At this time, Balanchine was still married. His treatment of LeClercq was not quite as scandalous as it seemed. Their marriage had cooled years before—even, it has been said, prior to her illness—and in the meantime he had had other infatuations (with Diana Adams, for one). But LeClercq was not the only person Balanchine was pledged to. He had a company of eighty-odd dancers, who looked on in dismay as the operations of N.Y.C.B. were restructured around the young Suzanne Farrell. Before, the troupe's daily class was taught by various people, including Balanchine. But by 1964 he began teaching company class every morning, and he appeared to tailor the exercises to Farrell. He seldom taught jumps anymore—and he took the jumps out of ballets she was now dancing—because she had a trick knee and was not good at them. Often, when he gave a combination, he would have Farrell demonstrate it first. "Do like Suzanne," he told the dancers.

By 1965, Farrell was the star of the company, performing the lead in twenty-eight ballets, one-third of the repertory. This meant she was appearing almost every night, frequently twice a night. As one of her colleagues put it, "No one else danced." Or, when other female principals got onstage, it was often in Balanchine's absence. Before, he had watched every one of his company's programs, to the end, from his post in the downstage-right wings. Now he left the theatre when Farrell was through for the night, and took her out to dinner.

Needless to say, she was hated—a "leper," as she once put it. This is almost always the position in which the director's favorite is cast, but Farrell's personality was not one likely to soften the blow. "People often said she was aloof and formidable," Diana Adams recalled in a 1982 interview with the dance critic David Daniel. "Well, she was. . . . She was exactly the same way when she was fourteen." Eventually, a number of the other female principals—Maria Tallchief, Mimi Paul, Patricia Wilde, Patricia Neary—walked out. The unhappiness rose to such a pitch that the audience, too, became part of it. Fans discussed it in coffee shops after the show; newspapers printed letters to the editor about it. The company was in a crisis.

Still, what Balanchine had done was not without logic. Imagine what it meant to him, after the losses he had suffered with his earlier ballerinas, to have this young, strong, gorgeous dancer walk into his life, capable, it seemed, of doing almost anything he asked, and ready to work every day until she dropped. Fate had sent her to him, he believed, and he was not going to turn away. "Watching him teach her," Adams said, "was like seeing an engineer tuning and revving up a fantastic new machine. . . . He began to make things harder and harder. Suzanne inhaled and kept going." He made things harder still. She kept up with him. Soon, they had left the rest of the company behind.

Balanchine had always wanted

"*And, if you don't have an attorney, we have millions of them.*"

greater amplitude, and soon after Farrell joined the company he desperately needed it, for in 1964 N.Y.C.B. moved from City Center to the New York State Theatre, in the recently opened Lincoln Center. His work now had to occupy one and a half times as much stage space as before. This challenge, and not just Farrell, was the reason he started teaching company class every day, and changed his class. Before, Melissa Hayden, one of the lead dancers of that time, has said, "he had talked for hours about the articulation of the foot." Now he was less interested in details. He wanted big steps, steps that could fill that echoing stage. But he was certainly influenced by the fact that he now had, in Farrell, a young wildcat who was dying to do big steps. And so, in collaboration with her, he developed a new style. Farrell calls it "off-balance" dancing, and its off-balance qualities—the reckless tilts and lunges—were indeed the first thing one noticed about it, but it was also new in its utterly plastic musicality and, above all, in its scale. Farrell's movement came in bolts, in waves, in tearing trajectories. (Balanchine rarely sent her out onstage without an expert partner, one who could prevent her from hurling herself into the orchestra pit.) Even when her dancing was slow, it was wild: pooling, flooding. And she performed this way not just in Balanchine's new ballets but in his old ones as well. She changed the repertory, and, as other dancers emulated her, she changed the company. In time, she affected every American company. If, today, American ballet dancers are notably headlong—feat-doers, ear-kickers—that is due in part to Farrell. And if, when they are also profound, they are profound in a cool, exalted, unactory way, that, too, in large measure, is Farrell speaking, or Farrell and Balanchine.

But when Farrell arrived Balanchine didn't just change his style; he seemed to change his content. Before, in what might be called his classic years—from 1928 ("Apollo") to about 1962 ("A Midsummer Night's Dream")—his ballets had addressed sex and religion, grief and fate, but those matters, for the most part, were bound in by classicism: tempered, formalized. Now they became pressing and specific. Many of the works that Balanchine made for Farrell in the so-called "Farrell years," the nineteen-sixties, had a sort of jazz-baby sexiness. In these pieces, her costumes tended to be fringed; she tended to be partnered by Arthur Mitchell, the company's one black man, a pairing that in the sixties had sexual implications. Some observers were taken aback by such directness. In time, the profane yielded to the sacred, and that was even more surprising. Now the supposed abstractionist was filling his stage with angels and gypsies, visions and confessions. Balanchine had embarked upon a "late period," and it was Farrell who took him there.

In 1967, Balanchine separated from LeClercq and moved into an apartment of his own. Now he and Farrell not only had dinner together every night; they had breakfast together every morning. She'd leave her house, pick up a cheese Danish for him, and go to his place for coffee. Then they would walk to the theatre. Farrell says they rarely discussed ballet when they weren't working. They played word games, and talked about their cats or the Bible. Outside the studio, they were usually alone. She didn't fit in with his friends. (They were old, she says, and "often talked in Russian about things that had happened before I was born.") As for her friends, she didn't have any. Eventually, she found one companion in the company, a Peruvian-born dancer named Paul Mejia, whom Balanchine liked, and considered safe—Mejia was devoted to him—but that was it. On nights when Balanchine was not free to take her home after the show, he sent his manager to do so.

For Balanchine, this was an old pattern. Throughout his career, his working method was to fall in love with a young dancer, make wonderful ballets for her, perhaps even marry her (LeClercq was his fourth wife), and then move on to the next young dancer. Farrell knew this, and she decided that her story would be different. She wouldn't marry him—he had asked—nor would she go to bed with him. She would just dance for him, and that would be enough, for both of them. She wasn't particularly interested in sex, and, according to her, he wasn't, either. (Maria Tallchief, his third wife, recalls in her memoir that he insisted on twin beds.) Their consummation came in the studio. In Anne Belle and Deborah Dickson's film "Suzanne Farrell: Elusive Muse," Farrell says that when Balanchine danced with her in the studio as he was choreographing his ballets, "it was extremely physical and extremely gratifying in that kind of way." It wasn't your usual sort of love affair, she adds, "but it was more passionate and more loving and more *more* than most relationships. It was terrific."

Then, gradually, it wasn't terrific anymore. She tried to see other men; Balanchine threw fits. She told him she would no longer be available for dinner every night. He said O.K., and then he stopped eating, whereupon a member of his staff pleaded with her, and she began having dinner with him again. One of the men in the company said to her, "Why don't you just sleep with him? . . . Is it such a big deal?" She was shocked. Still, she saw no way out. She stopped sleeping. She cried all the time. "I was being killed by it," she said. Her dancing suffered. (By 1968, according to Arlene Croce, in *Ballet Review*, she was starting to look not just extreme but vulgar.) The only person she could turn to with her troubles was Mejia, and, not surprisingly, she began to feel she was in love with him. This enraged her mother, who could not understand why she wouldn't marry Balanchine. (Who cared if he was old? He was a genius.) Farrell moved out—"with what I could carry," she says—and found her own apartment.

In the fall of 1968, Balanchine, apparently still believing that Farrell, if pressed, would marry him, flew to Mexico and applied for a divorce. It was granted the following February, but he couldn't act right away, because he had a commission to stage an opera in Hamburg. He left New York on February 16th. Five days later, in a church two blocks from the theatre, Farrell married Mejia. Balanchine's assistant, Barbara Horgan, flew to Hamburg and spent ten days calming him down.

When he returned, he would not speak to Farrell, and though her casting remained the same, Mejia's did not. He couldn't seem to get onstage. One night, two months after Farrell's wedding, the company was scheduled to dance "Symphony in C," and the dancer who was cast as the male lead in the third movement cancelled. Mejia had often performed that role. Farrell sent Balanchine an ultimatum. If Mejia did not dance that night in the third movement, she would not dance her famous role in the second movement; indeed, she would no longer dance for New York City Ballet. She was sure it would all work out. She went to the theatre, she put on her makeup, and then there was a knock at the door. It was the company's costume mistress, who came in, collected the "Symphony in C" tutu, and left, weeping. Balanchine had accepted Farrell's resignation.

She was twenty-three, and possibly the most celebrated dancer in America, but she could not just join another company. She was a creation of Balanchine's style and repertory. (She had never performed the "classics"—"Giselle," "The Sleeping Beauty.") And, as she soon found out, other American companies were not interested in hiring her. No one wanted to alienate Balanchine. Finally, Farrell and Mejia went to Europe, and danced in Brussels with Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the XXth Century, a company that had no connection with Balanchine. On the contrary. Béjart's work was not so much ballet as a sort of extravagant multimedia theatre. Many of Balanchine's fans felt as if Farrell had run off with a biker.

Balanchine went into a depression, and for the next two years he made little of interest. Then, as always, he recovered. In 1972, he staged his now famous Stravinsky Festival, and created for it at least two ballets, "Stravinsky

LANDING THAT TOUGH ACCOUNT

Violin Concerto" and "Symphony in Three Movements," that are among his masterworks. He even found a new woman, Karin von Aroldingen, a German dancer who was a member of the company—but not so young this time, and safely married—and formed with her a sort of *amitié amoureuse*. He made new ballets for her, and about her, together with works for and about the other female principals he had at that time, notably Patricia McBride, who now came into her own.

But the story with Farrell was not over. After four years with Béjart, she wrote Balanchine asking if she could come back to N.Y.C.B. It is hard to get her to explain why she did this. She loved Béjart, and she insists that she learned a lot from him. All she can say is that, on a vacation back in the States, she went to a performance by N.Y.C.B. and became so excited that she had to write to Balanchine, had to make a bid to dance his ballets again: "It was as instinctive as the understanding that George and I had in the studio: 'I'd like to do this—would you like to do this?' " In any case, Balanchine said yes. (To her only. Mejia took jobs elsewhere, and the two began living apart much of the time. They were divorced in 1998.) In January of 1975—in "Symphony in C," appropriately—Farrell bourréed out again on the stage of the New York State Theatre. Balanchine's passion did not reignite, but his inspiration did, and it was in this second, less tumultuous period that she spent with N.Y.C.B.—not in the "Farrell years"—that he fashioned the best roles he ever made for her, in "Chaconne," "Vienna Waltzes," "Walpurgisnacht Ballet," "Davidsbündlertänze." His last piece, "Variations for Orchestra" (1982), was for her. His last great piece, "Mozartiana" (1981), was for her.

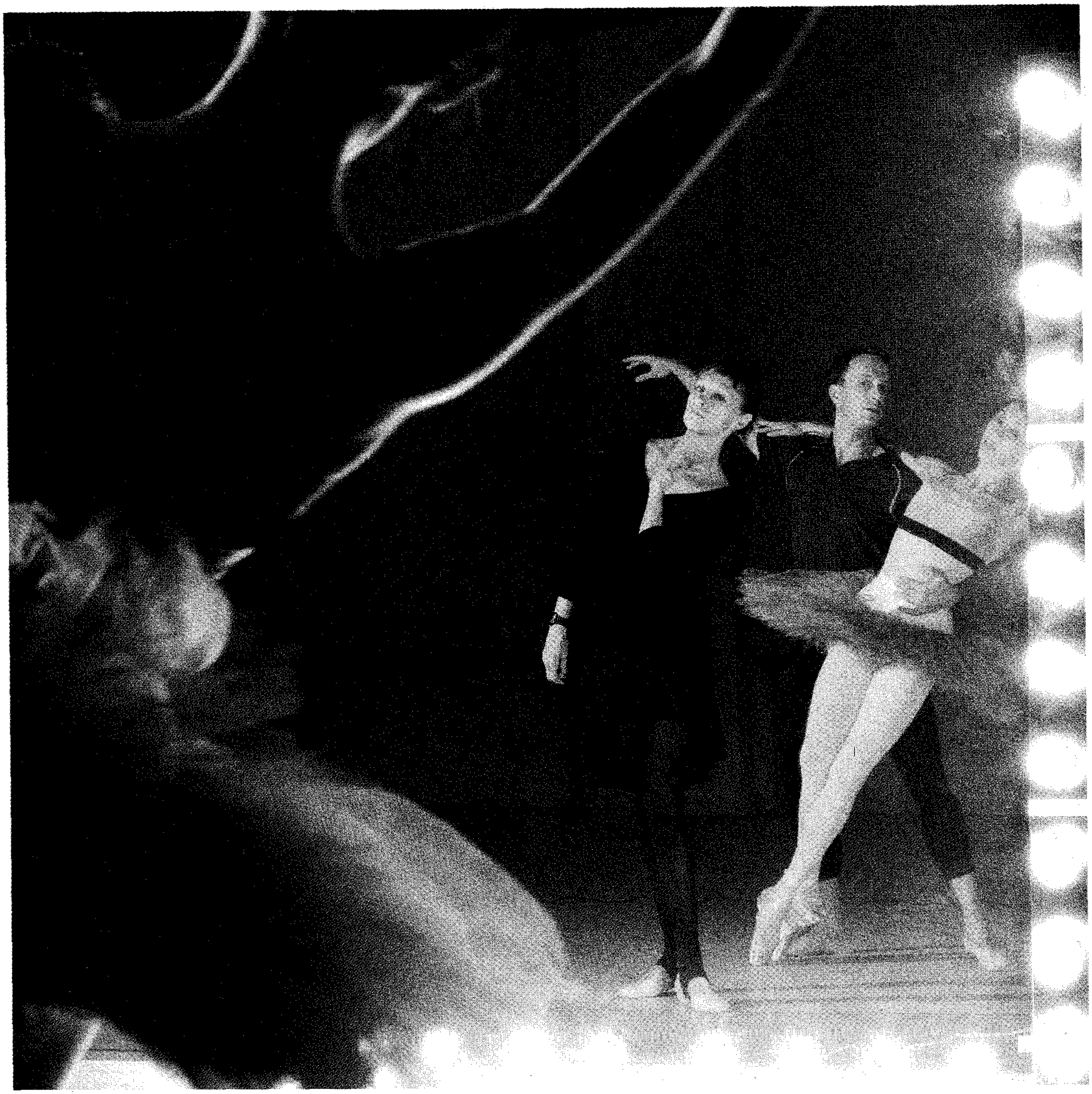
In 1982, when he was seventy-eight, he began having trouble with his balance, an early sign of what turned out, on autopsy, to be Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, the human version of mad-cow disease. (According to his doctor, he once got some "rejuvenation" injections in Switzerland. Such injections often contained extracts from animal glands.) Soon, he had other problems. Sounds were too loud; things looked blurry. That fall, he was taken to Roosevelt Hospital for observation, and he died there five months later.

According to some accounts, Balanchine had been grooming Peter Martins—a big, tall Dane who began dancing for him, as Farrell's partner, in 1967—to take over N.Y.C.B. after him. Martins had been making ballets for several years, and Balanchine had encouraged him. Yet, as Martins himself has pointed out, Balanchine never gave him a blessing as his successor. (And Martins sought it, went to his bedside for it.) Balanchine apparently didn't think he could have a successor, didn't believe that his ballets, so personal—this one about LeClercq, that one for Farrell—could survive without him. But the public wanted them to survive. So did N.Y.C.B.'s board. (Balanchine's ballets at that time constituted two-thirds of the company's repertory.) And to the board Martins seemed a logical choice. He was a superb classical dancer, and therefore, presumably, he could be counted on to safeguard the company's technique. Furthermore, he was handsome and clubbable: a good prospect for fund-raising. And so, with great haste—indeed, a month and a half before Balanchine died—he was installed as director. Jerome Robbins, who had long been N.Y.C.B.'s second choreographer, was made co-director, but it was understood that Martins would run the company.

For about two years, things went fine. Then a kind of coldness began to set in. The problem was not so much with the new repertory. If the pieces that Martins was making and commissioning were not as good as Balanchine's, what was? As long as he kept the Balanchine repertory in shape, he was doing his hard job as the great man's successor. But Martins, as it turned out, was not a "Balanchinean." Where Balanchine was an idealist, a mystic of sorts, Martins was skeptical, ironical, up-to-date. He set up seminars where dancers talked about being working mothers. He published an exercise book, "The New York City Ballet Workout," with photographs of ballerinas in jogging bras doing ab crunches. And, as was soon clear from the company's performances, he could not think himself into a different place, nor could his coaching staff. The dancers—uninformed, it seems, as to what Balanchine's work was about, but still knowing that it was "great" and famous—began performing it in a tight, blank way, as if it were a lesson they were trying to recite correctly. This was noticed by the press. Dale Harris, in the *Wall Street Journal*, called the company's performances "generally dispiriting." Tobi Tobias, in *New York*, described N.Y.C.B.'s Balanchine stagings as "vandalism." Other reviewers, notably at the *Times* and the Washington *Post*, defended Martins, saying that there were many ways to dance Balanchine. Caught in the middle of a fight, the dancers looked scared, and performed the ballets even more blankly.

Farrell was a logical person to do something about this situation, and Martins seemed to indicate that he was going to use her. In his speech at her retirement party, he said, "There will always be a place for Suzanne Farrell at New York City Ballet. She can do whatever she wants." He kept her on salary. Then, for three years, he asked her to do almost nothing. Finally, in 1993, the company manager called to say that Farrell was being removed from the payroll. The troupe's finances—which, in a public interview four months earlier, Martins had proudly described as being in excellent shape—were straitened, the company manager said.

"I was fired," Farrell says. Martins puts it differently. In a 2000 interview in *Talk*, he said that he offered Farrell a job at N.Y.C.B. but that she countered with all sorts of demands. For example, she expected an office of her own (he wanted to give her a desk in his office), and she asked for the title of associate director (he wanted to wait on that). "So there was this whole set of conditions," he recalled. "She didn't want it. That's the bottom line. If she's really honest with herself, she didn't want it." When I asked Farrell about this job offer, she said she had no recollection of it. "Why would I want an office?" she asked. "Do I have an office now? I want to work in the classroom. No, what happened is, he did offer me little things. He asked me to teach company class during 'Nutcracker,' when no one comes to class. He asked me to stage a ballet for S.A.B.—Balanchine's 'Gounod Symphony,' an enormous piece that I had never danced in, and had hardly seen. He offered me things that he thought I



Farrell, in rehearsal with Peter Boal and Chan Hon Goh, in October, 2002. Photograph by Dudley Reed.

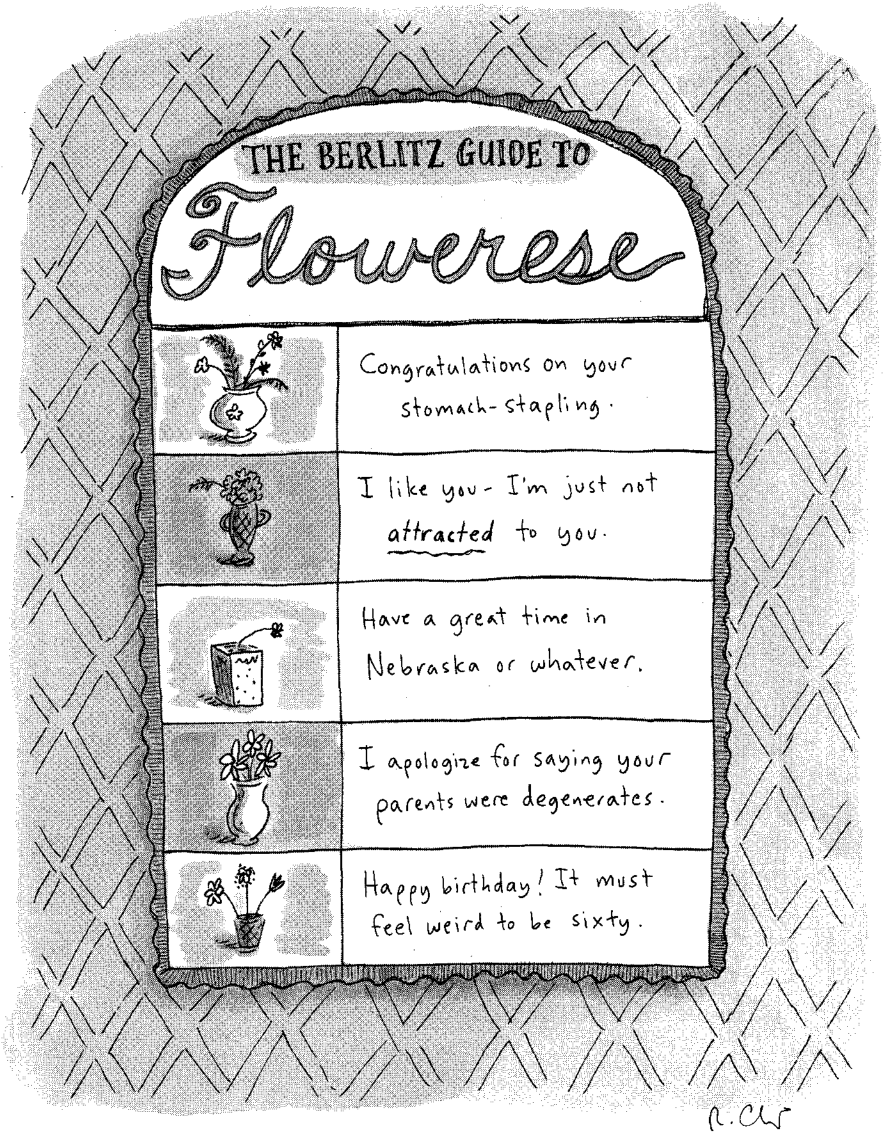
would turn down. But I didn't turn them down. I took these crumbs he offered me. Eventually, he figured out that he was not going to get rid of me that way, so then the other thing happened"—the call from the manager came.

Whatever the exact details, it would not be surprising if Martins, whose authority with regard to Balanchine's work was being questioned at this time, did not want on his staff the person who was widely considered to be the world's foremost expert in that matter. There were probably other reasons, too, for the company's failure to use Farrell. She was known to be standoffish. Furthermore, there is a widespread belief that great dancers do not make great teachers, that they can't bear to give it away. That rule has been broken many times—by Farrell, among others. Prior to her severance from N.Y.C.B., she had done highly praised settings of six Balanchine ballets. She was clearly an effective Balanchine coach.

Such was the situation in which James Wolfensohn saw an opening for the Kennedy Center. Farrell's first Balanchine season at the center, in 1995, had some rough spots, but even then one could see in it something interesting: all the dancers whom one already knew looked better than they ever had before. In the words of Alan Kriegsman, the Washington *Post's* dance critic, Farrell seemed to move dancers "beyond their own previous standards." Still, the Kennedy Center didn't rush her. After the 1995 season, she waited four years to present her next one. To everyone's surprise, it included "Meditation," the first piece Balanchine made for her, the one with the older man and the young ballerina-spirit. This ballet had a highly personal meaning for Farrell; with it, she has said, Balanchine had choreographed her life. No one but she had ever danced it, and consequently it hadn't been performed in fourteen years. It wasn't missed, actually. Many people remembered it as a sort of overwrought thing that might just as well be put in the drawer, like the old love letter that it was. Yet Farrell brought it out and set it on someone new, Christina Fagundes, formerly of American Ballet Theatre. Fagundes had never been a wafting sort of dancer. She was down-to-earth—a mezzo type—and she did "Meditation" in her own way. When Farrell danced it, the ballet was something that happened to the man; when Fagundes danced it, it was something that happened to her. Thus, if she was not better than Farrell had been, she was more poignant. If Farrell ever sought to show that she was willing to give what she had to others, this was the proof.

From the beginning, a crucial fact about the Suzanne Farrell Ballet was that it was a pickup company. It still is. Every year, once Farrell figures out what she's going to do, she has to get on the phone and find people to do it. Most good ballet dancers are employed by permanent companies, which they cannot necessarily leave for a five-night gig, let alone a five-week tour. As a result, Farrell seldom has ideal casts. As Alexandra Tomalonis put it in the Washington *Post*, "She's working with schoolgirls and soloists from all over the map." Even when she is working with stars, they are often overscheduled or under-rehearsed. Last season, her budget allowed her only four weeks to rehearse seven ballets, and at times that showed. There was many a mishap in the company's new production of "Who Cares?" Also, Farrell doesn't always have a choice of "types." For the lead man in "Who Cares?" you need a roguish, jazzy fellow. (He is dancing to Gershwin, and partnering three different women.) Runqiao Du is not such a fellow. He was trained in Shanghai, far from Gershwin's town, and he is sweet and open-faced. But he is the Farrell Ballet's regular lead male, so he did "Who Cares?" and probably learned a lot from the experience. The same goes for the women who occasionally fell off point in the ballet's solo variations. Farrell might have spared them by staging an easier ballet. But she staged "Who Cares?"—together with two other ballets, "Divertimento No. 15" and "Raymonda Variations," that have similarly tricky solos. And, if one saw mistakes in them, what one didn't see was the blur, the cheating, that sets in when dancers are trying to avoid mistakes. Every tiny detail was there, and if it went awry you got to see that. Farrell is ambitious for the company, and getting more so. In 2005, she hopes to stage the three-act "Don Quixote."

The dancers don't seem worried about the exposure. I remember, in Farrell's 2000 season, watching a young woman, Chan Hon Goh, try to get through "Divertimento No. 15." She wasn't strong enough for it, but she didn't know that. She smiled; she kicked her leg out before the beat. She thought she was doing fine. Once, Farrell talked about Balanchine's ability to communicate faith. At times, she said, "I'm sure he went home saying, 'Oh boy, I don't know if she's going to be able to do that.' But if he worried about us, he worried in silence. He never brought it into the studio." Neither does she, apparently. And, as with Balanchine, this pays off not just in the present but down the road. Last season, Goh danced the lead—Farrell's role—in Balanchine's "Chaconne," and now she had more than confidence. In the opening pas de deux, she looked like the Winged Victory. Farrell rarely speaks in psychological terms, but she is a shrewd psychologist. At one point, I asked her about her use of metaphors—the Madonna's arms, etc.—in coaching. I was thinking that this approach was rooted in some deep, mystic chamber of dance knowledge. Well, yes, she said. Then, unmystically, she added that if


THE BERLITZ GUIDE TO
Flowerese
Congratulations on your stomach-stapling.
I like you - I'm just not attracted to you.
Have a great time in Nebraska or whatever.
I apologize for saying your parents were degenerates.
Happy birthday! It must feel weird to be sixty.

you correct dancers in terms of their technique, the thing they have worked so hard on, this can be wounding to them. "But if you give them a metaphor they go home and figure it out, and they haven't gotten a complex about it."

Farrell has never played down what she sees as the importance, to the art of dance, of the fact that she and Balanchine found each other—"I don't think anything or anyone could have stopped this destiny that was happening," she once said—and she is not above reminding us of this. In her staging, this past season, of Balanchine's "Variations for Orchestra," a 1982 solo for her, to Stravinsky, she inserted a second dancer, seen only as a towering shadow on a drop curtain, doing sometimes the same steps as the soloist in front of the curtain, and sometimes different steps. On the last note of the piece, the shadow dancer took an elaborate bow. This was a big change to make in a Balanchine ballet, but Farrell has said that she actually choreographed most of "Variations." (Balanchine was very ill at the time.) If I'm not mistaken, the second dancer was her tribute to her own shadow presence—not just in "Variations" but in most of Balanchine's late work. Still, however much she honors her own career, she does not expect, or even want, her dancers to reproduce what she did. She told me that on the first day of the "Meditation" rehearsals Fagundes said to her, " 'Oh, how must you feel, teaching this part?' And I said to her, 'Look, Christina, you can never have my story. You have to find your own story.' " Farrell, with Balanchine, made the ballet once, out of their lives. Now Fagundes, with Farrell, had to make it again, out of her life. When a ballet is performed even once, Farrell says, "You'll never have that innocent little ballet again—that insecurity, that vulnerability, our faces all so intense." To stay intense, the piece has to become something new. "Only now," as Balanchine said.

Farrell is not troubled by the thought that the ballets will change in the process. "George trusted me," she says. "We trusted each other. Don't listen to what he said about how he didn't care if his ballets survived. He cared a great deal. He never dubbed me or anything like that, but I don't think we would have had the understanding we had if he hadn't meant me to take it somewhere else. Wasn't that just as destined as our meeting? He expected me to go on. He expected it."

What no one could have foreseen was the demands that this new assignment would make on her personality. In Diana Adams's words, Farrell was "aloof and formidable" even as a teen-ager. More than aloofness is involved here, though. Farrell, in her early years, was fantastically narrow—a geek, an obsessive, a human drill bit, as young artists often are. She says in her memoir that in 1963 she didn't know who the Beatles were. For her purposes, she didn't need to know. Nor did she need to know who anyone else was, apart from Balanchine. When she was onstage, she never looked at the audience. "I dance for God," she said. If others wanted to watch, that was their business. But running a company is different from performing in one. You must deal with people—administrators, musicians, dancers—and Farrell has learned to do so. "She's the least diva-esque person I've ever worked with," Michael Kaiser, the president of the Kennedy Center, says. She accepts the compliment. "I'm a team player," she says. Her former colleagues at N.Y.C.B. will be surprised to hear this. Nevertheless, it seems to be true—now. The shows bear it out.

The most moving spectacle I ever witnessed in a performance by the Suzanne Farrell Ballet was Peter Boal, of N.Y.C.B., in Balanchine's "Apollo." In the seventies, Boal was one of S.A.B.'s star pupils. Ballet mothers, there to fetch their children, used to crowd around the door of the studio where he was taking class. He was an ultra-classical dancer, with an innate nobility and reserve—qualities that were impressive in a child, and that made him perfect for Balanchine, the only problem being that by the time Boal joined N.Y.C.B. Balanchine was dead. For nearly twenty years, Boal has been a pillar of the company, but his career has not been what it should have been. He has never danced any way but beautifully, but at times he also looked a little weary, as if he wished he were somewhere else.

Then came the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. "When she calls," Boal told me, "the first thing I say is yes. Then we work out the details." When she called in 2001, he was on his way to Tokyo, and showed up in Farrell's studio two days before he was to dance the title role in "Apollo." This was not a crisis—he had performed the role many times at N.Y.C.B. But in the "Apollo" that took the stage at the end of that week Boal was very different from what he had been before. He was a young man again—something I'm not sure I saw when he was a young man. In the ballet, when he was born, he was really born: fresh, disorderly, wet almost. As he grew—that is the story of the ballet, Apollo's progress from his birth to the moment when he realizes he's a god, and departs with the Muses for Olympus—he was different at every stage, differently vibrant. He flew, he jumped, he sweated. "Apollo" is not just any Balanchine ballet. It is his oldest extant ballet, and possibly the most canonized. It is glazed by time and fame and use, and Boal has performed it that way. But for Farrell he peeled its skin off. In the finale, the Muses caught Boal's mood, and when the great minor chord sounded, telling them it was time to leave for Olympus, the three women reached toward him on bended knees that were perfectly classical, perfect triangles, but also pink and trembling. They were going to Heaven! They couldn't believe it!

I wonder if Balanchine's early companies—which, before 1948, were also pickup companies—did not look like this, and maybe New York City Ballet, too, in its City Center days. Art doesn't start out hallowed. It starts personal: an emergency. When Balanchine's oldest fans speak of certain moments—of Maria Tallchief in "The Firebird," gliding across the dark stage, putting the monsters to sleep, or of Tanaquil LeClercq in "Western Symphony," wearing her sexy black hat and banging out fouettés—it seems to me that this is what they mean: theatre that isn't just a show but something immediate, unfakable. I came to Balanchine in the late nineteen-sixties. He, too, was in his sixties then. However good he was, it is possible that he was better when he was in his twenties, and made "Apollo." Watching Boal that night, I thought of this. Perhaps what we are seeing in the Farrell Ballet is an avatar of the early Balanchine, young and crazy. Maybe it has to be this way every time. ♦

THE SKY LINE

DESIGNING DOWNTOWN

How will so many people with so many different ideas agree on the new proposals for the World Trade Center site?

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

The first six proposals for rebuilding the World Trade Center site were unveiled last July, at a press conference in Federal Hall, on Wall Street. John Beyer, of Beyer Blinder Belle, the architectural firm that drew up most of the plans, sat on a platform in the hall's grand marble rotunda, as did Louis Tomson, the president of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. Alexander Garvin, the L.M.D.C.'s head of planning, stood at the back of the room, and when the presentation was over he slipped out a side door. He knew the proposals were a disaster: six variations on the same theme, none of which rose to the historic occasion. The designers seemed to be concerned primarily with arranging eleven million square feet of office space around Ground Zero.

Garvin's absence from the stage wasn't entirely by choice. He had lost several battles about the direction the plans were to take—mainly with the Port Authority, which built the original World Trade Center and still owns the land and wants to restore the commercial space that was blown to bits on September 11th. But Garvin also had arguments with his colleagues at the L.M.D.C. Louis Tomson, a longtime associate of Governor Pataki, favored working with the Beyer plans. Two members of the corporation's board, Roland Betts, founder of the Chelsea Piers sports complex in Manhattan, and Billie Tsien, an architect, were less enthusiastic. "I felt really uncomfortable when those schemes were publicly presented, and I wondered why I was on this board," Tsien told me.

A few days after the press conference in Federal Hall, a public meeting was held at the Javits Center to hear a broad range of responses to the new proposals. The meeting took place on a sweltering Saturday, but nearly five thousand people showed up anyway. They sat at round tables and answered questions on electronic instant-polling devices. They were asked to evaluate the six schemes as excellent, good, adequate, or poor, and in every case the largest number of votes fell into the category of poor. When the participants were asked to select the feature of the plans that bothered them most, the highest number of votes went to "Schemes not ambitious enough." The second most troublesome thing, according to the poll, was the excessive amount of office space that all the plans included.

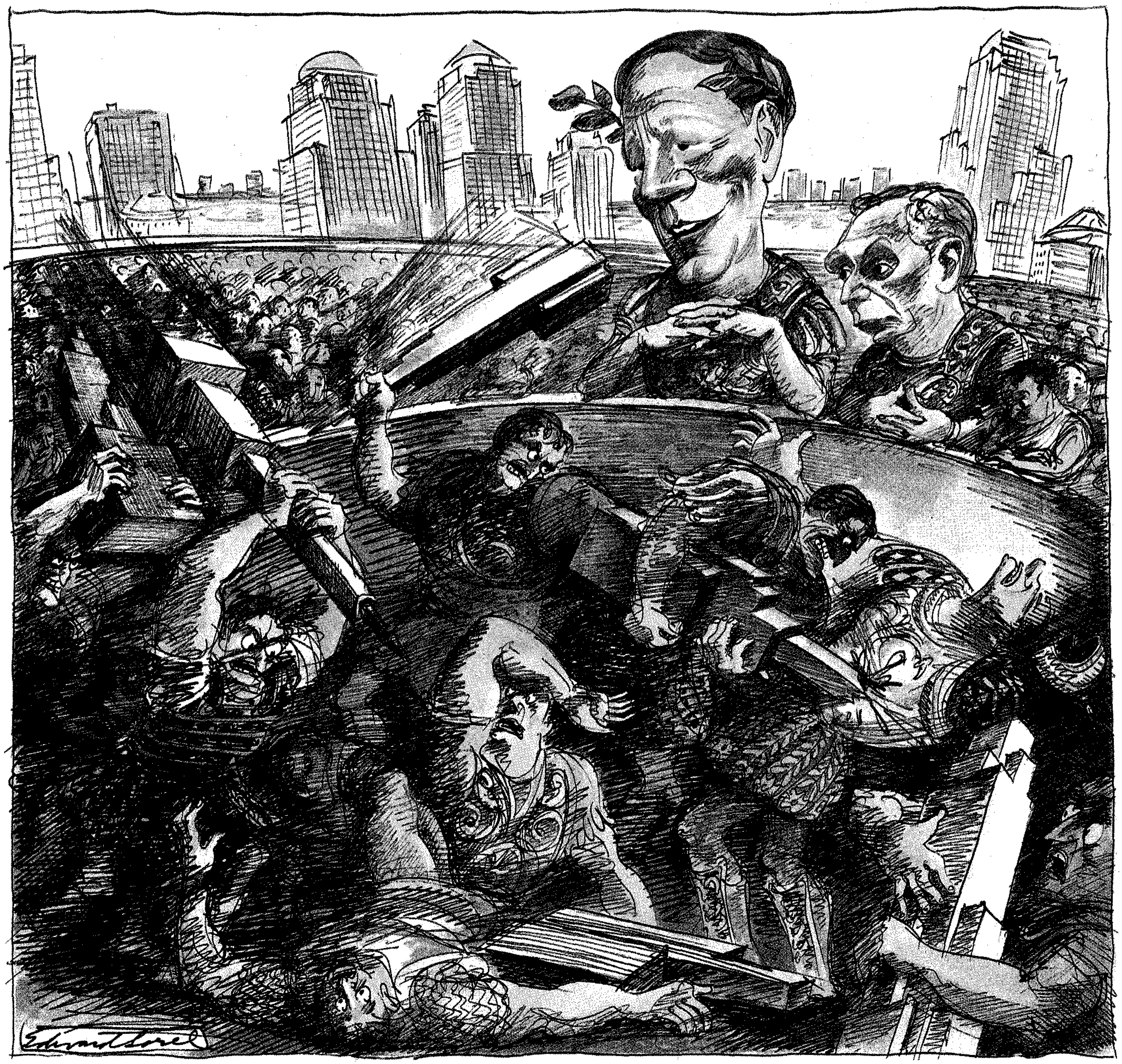
The L.M.D.C. had been saying all along that the plans were only conceptual and shouldn't be viewed as if they were finished designs, and that a long period of public dialogue was expected, but it was hard to have a dialogue about something that everyone seemed to hate. Daniel Doctoroff, the city's deputy mayor for economic development and rebuilding, who shared Garvin's reservations about the plans, made no attempt to hide his delight that they had been so roundly rejected. "It strikes me that what occurred today has been profound," he told the crowd. He was reminded, he said, of Abraham Lincoln's "Right makes might" speech in 1860 at Cooper Union. Like that occasion, the event at the Javits Center would change history.

The meeting at the Javits Center was, in fact, an emblematic event in the history of city planning, but it could perhaps be better compared to the time, in 1968, when the author and critic Jane Jacobs destroyed the records of a public hearing about the expressway that Robert Moses wanted to run across Lower Manhattan. Jacobs's act of civil disobedience—those were the days when people burned draft cards to protest the Vietnam War—was intended to stop a big project. For the next generation, most public activism in the realm of city planning was intended to prevent things like highways and sewage plants and tall buildings from being built. Since you don't get reëlected by proposing unpopular things, over the years fewer and fewer big public projects were initiated in New York. That is one of the reasons the original plans for Ground Zero were so cautious, and so bland. Nobody wanted to be Robert Moses anymore.

Alex Garvin didn't want to be Robert Moses, either, but in the course of the day at the Javits Center he began to act like a man who realized that something was happening that might save his job. He wandered around the floor, listening to conversations and watching the polling results flash onto screens high up in the center of the room. "Five thousand people in a room arguing passionately about urban design!" he said. "This fills me with hope."

It was clear that the six plans would probably have to be junked altogether, and Billie Tsien and Roland Betts soon emerged as the prime movers in an effort to shift the direction of the process. They encouraged the rest of the L.M.D.C. board to listen to Alex Garvin. He had no power to make the Port Authority change its position, but he could do something to erase the memory of the six discredited schemes. Garvin, who is sixty-one and has spent most of his career teaching planning at Yale and working in city government, is a trained architect whose first job was working for Philip Johnson. With the support of Betts and Tsien, he decided to play the architecture card. He set out to make the L.M.D.C., at least for a few months at the end of 2002, into the most conspicuous architectural patron in the world.

It was a shrewd decision, because it moved the planning process to an arena that the Port Authority had traditionally shown little interest in. With the help of New York New Visions, a group of architects who had been making proposals for establishing guidelines at Ground Zero, Garvin announced late last summer that the L.M.D.C. wanted



Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg are two of the most important arbiters of what will happen in Lower Manhattan.

EDWARD SOREL

to hear from any architect who felt qualified to make a design for the Trade Center site. Four hundred and six teams of architects responded, and in September a panel of advisers was selected to winnow the list. They included Betts and Tsien, together with Terence Riley, head of the department of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, and Toshiko Mori, chair of the department of architecture at Harvard. Garvin had wanted to include the architect Daniel Libeskind, who has had a reputation as a creator of commemorations of tragic events ever since the completion four years ago of his Jewish Museum in Berlin, a kind of de-facto Holocaust memorial. Garvin tracked down Libeskind and his wife and partner, Nina, who were at the opening of the Architecture Biennale in Venice. "Libeskind agreed to do it, and Nina said it was just as well, since they had been thinking of submitting their qualifications"—to make one of the new designs—"but figured that there was no way they would be selected," Garvin says. "Then it turned out that Libeskind couldn't make the meeting date and so he submitted anyway, and we ended up choosing him."

Seven teams of architects were chosen for what Garvin called the Innovative Design Study, as if to emphasize how different it was from the first round of proposals. In addition to Libeskind, there was Norman Foster; a team led by Rafael Viñoly and Frederic Schwartz; a team consisting of Richard Meier, Charles Gwathmey, Peter Eisenman, and Steven Holl; a team including Greg Lynn, Jesse Reiser, and Ben Van Berkel; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; and Steven Peterson and Barbara Littenberg, partners in a small firm of architects and urban designers in New York. It is almost easier to name the famous architects who did not participate. (Frank Gehry said no thanks, as did Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.) The teams were given eight weeks and forty thousand dollars each to produce their designs. The amount was a pittance—a big architectural model can cost ten times that much—but the L.M.D.C. figured that few architects would turn down the chance to produce a design for the most famous building project on earth, even for nothing.

The architects were asked to come to New York in mid-October for a daylong briefing with Garvin. What they got was not only a tour of Ground Zero but a talk from Garvin about his vision for downtown. He told the architects he wanted them to think about Ground Zero in the year 2020 in terms of four people he imagined would be using the future Trade Center site. "The first is a person who lives south of Liberty Street in a converted old building, works in Tribeca, and came to the site because he saw an ad for a cultural event there," Garvin said. "The second is a business traveller who came to Lower Manhattan on the AirTrain to attend a conference at the new conference center, and noticed that there was an opera in the new opera house and went to it at night before going back to his hotel. The third is a tourist who comes to see the memorials at Ground Zero and stays at a more modest hotel. And the fourth is a commuter who arrives by ferry, walks to work in Lower Manhattan, has lunch on Fulton Street, and then takes the No. 4 subway from the new train station to a meeting uptown."

Garvin monitored the designs closely, and he required the teams to make presentations as they went along. The famous architects were told that they could get by with less office space than had been required in the summer, not because the Port Authority has reduced its demand that the old commercial space be replaced but because it might let some of the space be put into new buildings that could go up on sites near Ground Zero. The architects were required to allow for substantial retail space and also for a large station that would accommodate the area's various subway and train lines, and Garvin told them to include a hotel and conference center, cultural facilities, and a memorable skyline element. They were also asked to replace part of the grid of streets that had been taken away when the original World Trade Center was built, and to design the projects so that they could be built in phases, over many years.

FIGURE APPROACHING, OPPOSITE

It was someone I knew, had known in one of those lives
somewhere but where, it was whispering so fast I needed time;

not sure, and yet a girl shape so like Nina—just thinking of Nina
was a smile spreading along my spine—although of course it

couldn't be Nina: so in a hurry high heels tapping on pavement
arms hugging a plastic bundle, yes, Nina's moon face under a shag.

If this was now, Nina back then, how far back might be only last year
when events had begun to take their toll on her imperturbability,

cramped her style, if style it was, wearing no makeup with jeans
that always turned out to be Claire's. Closer now I see it's not Nina

but Claire, the only one we called reasonable, trying to keep Nina
from ruining Kevin's life (and her own), Claire holding up Jenny as

a model of happy union with Rick; she believed it until the night
Jenny was found slashed and comatose in the bathtub, lovely Jenny

When the new proposals were unveiled to the public, in mid-December, at a three-and-a-half-hour-long press conference on the stage of the Winter Garden, at the World Financial Center, Alex Garvin did not stay in the back of the room. He introduced the architects with the air of an impresario who had managed to bring his show to Broadway. And every one of the new designs—there are nine, since the team led by Rafael Viñoly submitted three schemes—was serious and worth talking about.

Garvin had said that the L.M.D.C. intended not to pick a single winner but, rather, to use the project as a source of ideas. Once the designs began to emerge, however, he decided to give up on his notion of treating the architects' work like a smorgasbord, picking and choosing what was best. "We said we could combine these, but it's not going to happen," Garvin said. "The designs are polar opposites. You can't really take half of Greg Lynn and put it with half of Richard Meier."

Actually, you couldn't put half of Richard Meier together with much of anything, considering what Meier and his colleagues produced: a set of five identical 1,111-foot-tall towers that are crisscrossed by horizontal sections, so that the structure forms a grid in the sky—the world's biggest ticktacktoe board. The squarish towers have an austere, minimalist elegance, but if you take away the horizontal elements they look uncomfortably like five little World Trade Centers. They are even set on a superblock, like the original World Trade Center. There is, to be fair, a subtle and profound aspect to the design, which the architects call Memorial Shadows Park, based on the notion that the shadows of the original World Trade Center towers at the moment of their destruction would be projected westward from the footprints to become piers extending into the river. But the gargantuan squares in the sky seem more like a comic-book artist's notion of futuristic architecture than like the work of four of the most sophisticated architects of our time. (Or is it three? Given how little of Eisenman's characteristic style of slashing, slicing angles is visible here, I wonder how involved he really was.) Meier and Gwathmey have always loved grids—some of their most elegant houses are based on exquisite compositions of squares—and Holl just finished a building at M.I.T. in which the whole façade is a grid. But a pattern that works

giving all she had in the world to promote Rick's so-called career
in that dedicated way Claire so loved, not realizing it was Jenny

herself she loved—or was it Nina—but wanting them all to succeed
in spite of rent and the violence that sent Jenny to her, tender Jenny

but transparent. Claire could see right through Jenny if she danced
in front of light and fast, as if there might be other dances waiting

to be danced; that was Jenny and here she comes, it's Jenny not Claire,
I might have known, Jenny now working in some convenience store,

its logo half visible on the bag clutched to her chest. I open my mouth to
say Hi, the bundle snorts at me from a dripping snout between red eyes

while Jenny's stare shoves the void into my gaping mouth that I close
barely in time to see that it wasn't Jenny after all, nor was it Claire or

even Nina, just someone with a bundle of virulent convenience,
behind me now, my grateful breathing glad she did not know me.

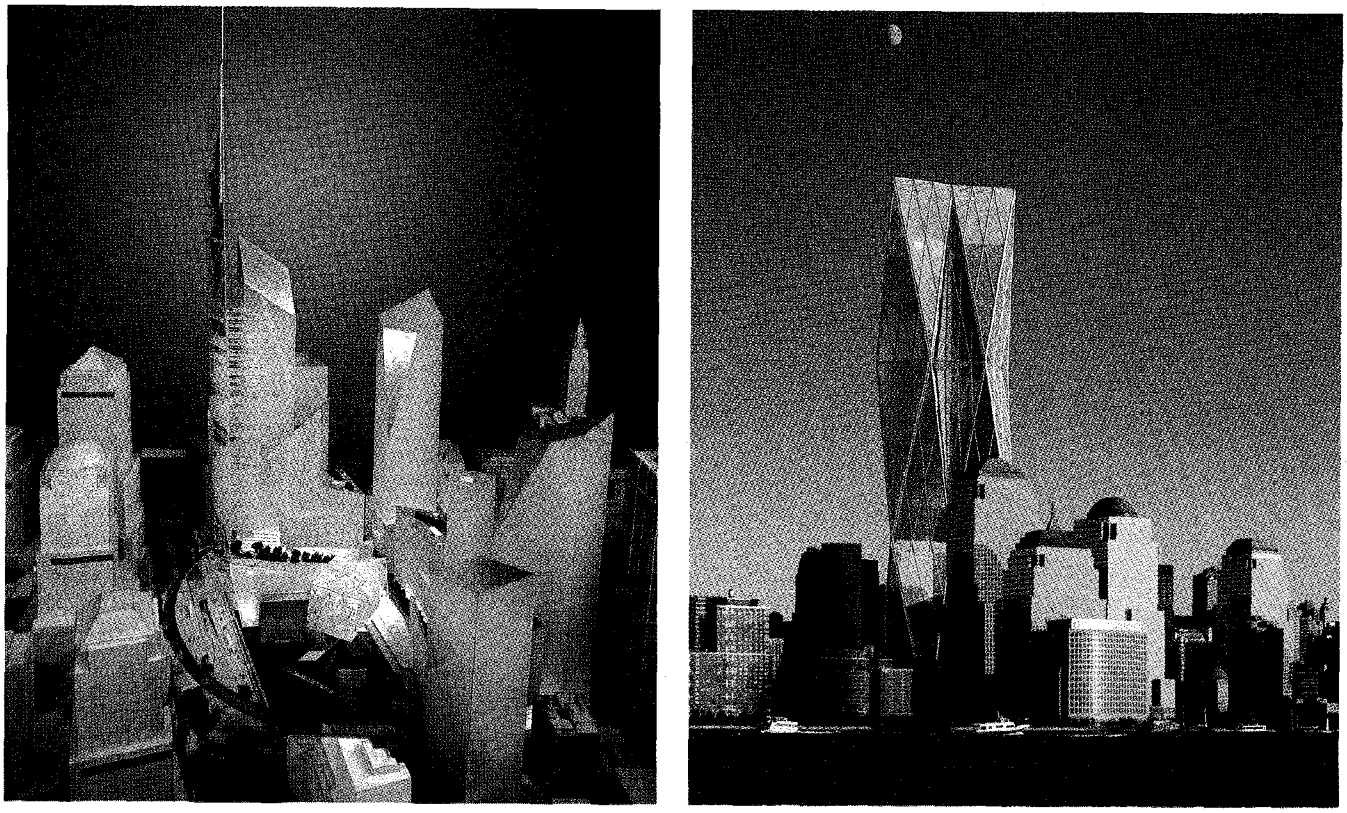
—*Dorothea Tanning*

for a small building or a household object can appear bizarre as a thousand-foot tower. The architects describe the project as "a matrix of voids and solids that remind us of the presence of those absent, and allow us to reflect and dream."

A certain amount of pious rhetoric was evident in almost all the presentations, surely in reaction to the overdose of pragmatism in July. Daniel Libeskind explained his brilliant and powerful design by describing Ground Zero after it was excavated: "The heroic foundations held and stand as eloquent as the Constitution. . . . We need a journey with deliberation and procession . . . through the Edge of Hope, the Museum of Memory." Libeskind calls his project Memory Foundations, and it is based on the idea that the enormous concrete slurry wall that kept the Hudson River out of the World Trade Center foundation should be retained as the heart of a below-ground memorial, which would surround the footprints of the twin towers. In Libeskind's plan, the excavation at Ground Zero would remain open and exposed, and visitors would journey downward into it. There would also be a museum structure and an elevated, curving promenade allowing visitors to view the site from above. The eastern portion of the site would have taller commercial and cultural buildings as well as the required train station, but the tallest structure of all would be primarily symbolic: a 1,776-foot-tall tower at the northwest corner of the site that would contain a series of landscapes inside open trusswork, "because gardens are a constant affirmation of life." At ground level, Libeskind proposes putting a marker in the pavement in the name of each rescue company that responded on September 11th, set on a direct line between Ground Zero and the rescuers' home base, making the pavement throughout the site a latticework of commemoration.

Libeskind's greatest gift is for interweaving simple, commemorative concepts and abstract architectural ideas—there is no one alive who does this better. His buildings are crisp and sharp, and he is the most likely figure to pull together the conflicting constituencies. He described his project with an almost schoolboyish earnestness. Norman Foster, by contrast, was suave. Lord Foster—he is a British peer—appeared in a black turtleneck and rhapsodized about the difficulty of giving physical form to the complex set of issues surrounding Ground Zero: "How do you measure intangibles? How do you measure emptiness, loss, memories? How do you balance that against life and regeneration?" For Foster, whose metal-and-glass skyscrapers, airports, and industrial structures are among the sleekest buildings of our time, the questions are not as rhetorical as they sound. He thinks that the answer is to put the world's tallest building on the site, and he has designed it in the form of a pair of seventeen-hundred-foot towers based on triangular forms. The towers touch each other at certain points, and from a distance would appear to be one huge building. "Two towers which kiss and touch and become one," Foster said, and he described his building as "the tallest, the greenest, the strongest, and the safest." He had few plans for the rest of the site, however, save for putting up walls around the footprints of the twin towers to make them roofless memorial rooms. Despite his eagerness to remind the audience that he is at ease in New York—he tossed off references to four subway lines and the PATH trains—he made little attempt to integrate his plan with the rest of Lower Manhattan. His tower is striking, even magnificent, but it could not be built in phases, and it seems comfortable only on a superblock. Perhaps because it looked like an updated version of the twin towers, or because he made much of his belief that it was essential to build the world's tallest building on the site, Foster's project seemed to be the most popular. It won an instant poll on CNN, and the New York *Post* devoted its entire front page to a color picture of it the day after the presentations were made.

The megastructure proposed by United Architects is not as tall or as elegant as Foster's, but it is actually larger. United Architects is a consortium made up of some of the best younger, experimental-minded architects in the world: Greg Lynn, of Los Angeles; Ben Van Berkel, of UN Studio in Holland; Foreign Office Architects, of London; Reiser + Umemoto, in New York; and Kevin Kennon, who also works in New York. These are exceptionally talented people, all of whom use computers heavily in the design process, and it is not surprising that they invited Imaginary Forces, a computer-graphics design firm, to join their team. Like the Meier team, United Architects wanted to reinterpret the notion of the skyscraper, and what they have produced



Daniel Libeskind's proposal for the World Trade Center site is anchored by a symbolic tower; Norman Foster's has the world's

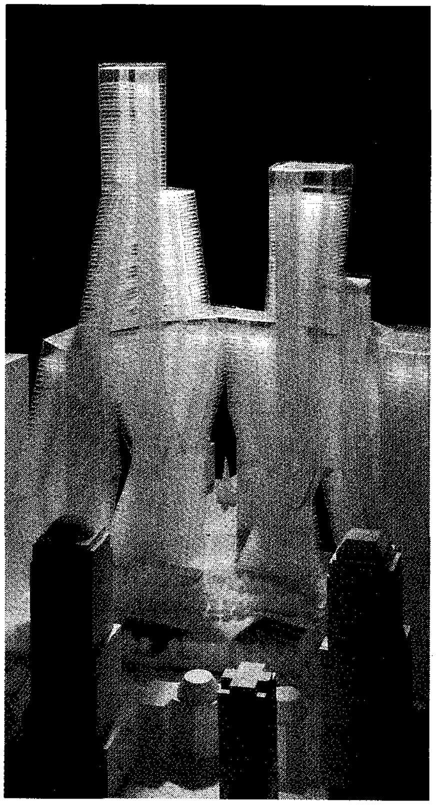
COURTESY LOWER MANHATTAN DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

is both more expansive and more zestful than the buttoned-up tower produced by their elders. It is even more gargantuan, however—almost terrifyingly so. It would be one of the world's largest buildings, and, while it could be built in stages as five separate structures, when the whole thing was finished it would be one interconnected colossus containing more than ten million square feet.

Is this a super-high-tech version of Paolo Soleri's city made out of a single building? The structure looks like a set of vast X-shaped towers, mounting toward a high center point; several of the sections rise on the diagonal, and while from some angles the building would be quite graceful on the skyline, from others it would appear to have a huge, bulging midriff. Greg Lynn, who presented the project clearly, made the structural system seem quite rational. He explained that the building would have multiple cores and stair towers for safety, and several enormous floor areas where the various towers connect horizontally. At the sixtieth floor, a five-story-high space would join all the towers horizontally. Lynn called this "a five-story city in the sky, a new kind of urbanism." He described the huge, triangular gateways under the X's as "sacred, cathedral-like space," which I hope would be true, although it is possible to envision them as invoking not awe but fear. The best element here is the "sky gardens," landscaped terraces every few stories that recall the work of the late visionary architect Roger Ferri, who designed several skyscrapers with hanging gardens twenty years ago. (Ferri was something of a hovering presence at the presentation of the designs, many of which include some form of garden in the sky.)

Rafael Viñoly, who worked with Frederic Schwartz of New York, Shigeru Ban of Tokyo, and Ken Smith of New York in a team that became known as THINK, produced three schemes, ranging from the somewhat practical to the highly theoretical. The first, called Sky Park, is a sixteen-acre park atop a base of cultural facilities, surrounded by three office towers to be designed by different architects. The second, called Great Hall, is more ambitious but somewhat ominous: the site of Ground Zero is surrounded by a wall of thirty-story buildings and covered by a glass roof to create what Viñoly describes as "the world's largest room." The mammoth room incorporates the footprints of the twin towers, which would be surrounded by glass walls, so that the footprints would appear, alas, to be imprisoned in the world's largest terrariums. This plan also has a very tall slender tower off to the side, and incorporates a large train station. The other dense plan is more daring conceptually, and also more appealing. It places conventional buildings containing offices, hotels, and retail space along the eastern side of the site, and calls for open frameworks to be built around the footprints of the original towers. The frameworks, square Eiffel Towers, would have viewing platforms at about the height of the roof of the twin towers, and cultural facilities set into the frameworks, like drawers, at various intervals on the lower levels. "So the World Trade Center becomes the World Cultural Center, sort of like the Eiffel Tower with functions," Viñoly says. "You never touch the footprints, and yet the footprints make possible the structure." It is a beautiful work of art, and could have as powerful an emotional impact as Libeskind's.

The team headed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill made a similar decision to emphasize a conceptual statement over a purely pragmatic plan. In Skidmore's case, this was probably a wise strategic move; the firm has not been looking very visionary lately. It has been working for



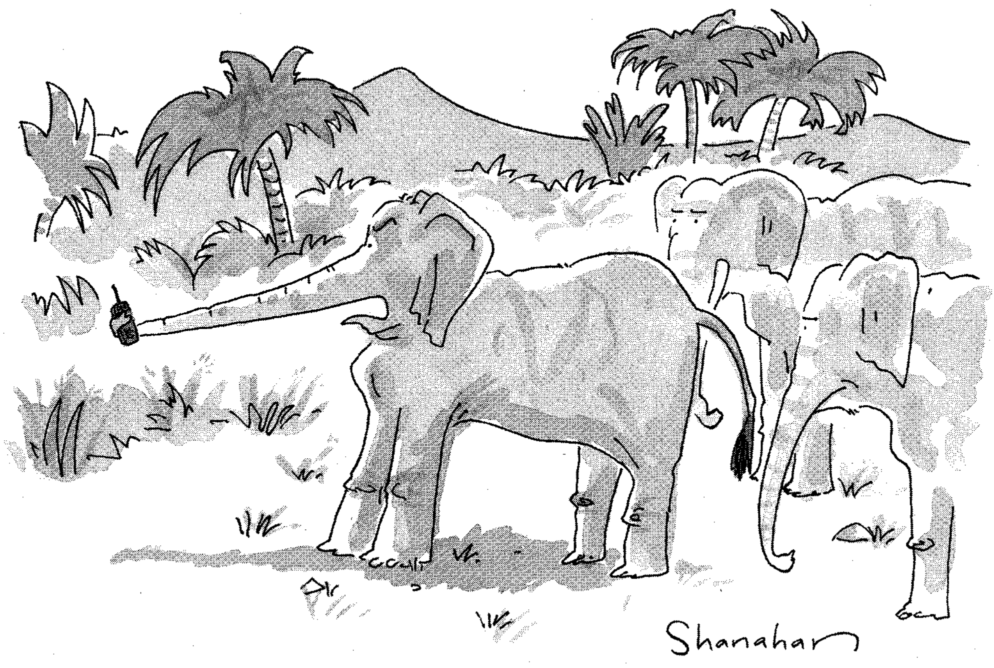
tallest building; United Architects propose a building that is itself a city; Richard Meier's team has designed a five-tower grid.

the developer Larry Silverstein—who held the lease on the twin towers—both as an over-all planner and as the architect for Seven World Trade Center, the building adjacent to Ground Zero that Silverstein has already begun to construct. Skidmore set itself up as den mother to a group of younger artists and architects, perhaps as a way of burnishing its artistic credentials. The result is a project top-heavy with concept and weak in aesthetics: nine wavy towers of identical height fill the Ground Zero site as a statement "intended to demonstrate how an increasingly densified city can be a better place to live and work." As in some of the other designs, there are appealing gardens and public spaces high above ground level, but this project is a blur on the skyline, not the memorable element that the L.M.D.C. called for. It does make a strong statement for sustainability and environmental sensitivity, but it is hard to believe that this will be enough to satisfy the craving for emotion that affects all judgments made about the architecture of Ground Zero.

And then, finally, there is the one traditional scheme, by Steven Peterson and Barbara Littenberg, who have been working as consultants to the L.M.D.C. for the past year. Their design studies yielded the notion of a landscaped promenade down West Street framing the view of the Statue of Liberty, which was one of the only things retained from the infamous six original plans. On the basis of their earlier work, they got themselves invited to the current party, to which they came dressed in Brooks Brothers, knowing full well that everyone else would be garbed in Prada. Peterson presented the plan as a re-creation of the essential elements of the New York cityscape. "This is not Houston or Dallas," he said. "New York is a city of towers." Their plan has some delicate and subtle urban-design gestures, including a memorial that consists of a large garden around the footprints of the twin towers, surrounded by the walls of medium-rise buildings, as if Turtle Bay Gardens, the common back yard between a block of brownstones in the East Forties, were raised to monumental civic scale. The footprint of one tower would be a reflecting pool, and the other would be an amphitheatre with nearly three thousand seats, in commemoration of the people who died at the Trade Center.

But the architecture of the Peterson and Littenberg plan is dreary. They may have thought that people would find it comforting to have a pair of fourteen-hundred-foot-high skyscrapers that look like the Empire State Building, but, next to the startling reinventions of the skyscraper that other architects have come up with, their towers seem tired. The public and critical craving for boldness that brought down the initial six plans last July is, at least to some extent, a craving for the new. The skyscraper is the greatest contribution American architecture has made to the world, but technology and the environmental movement have made boxes like the World Trade Center obsolete. It is hard to imagine a better place than Ground Zero to demonstrate what the skyscraper might become in the future.

Architecture surely seemed to matter that morning in December at the press conference in the Winter Garden, if only because a roomful of public officials was sitting still for a three-and-a-half-hour festival of avant-garde culture. But not that much has actually changed in the planning process since last summer. "It is like putting lipstick on a hog," said Robert Yaro, president of the Regional Plan Association, a civic group. "Nothing has changed except you have a lot of fancy architects on this go-round. They are still designing the same thing,



"Hey, Tarzan—no need to yell."

• •

just prettier." And the forces that have made planning at Ground Zero a process of byzantine complexity have not gone away. If anything, they have become more intense.

The L.M.D.C. was set up by Governor Pataki to oversee the reconstruction of the Trade Center site, but it has only limited power, because it does not actually control the land it is supposed to plan; the Port Authority does. Pataki shares control of the Port Authority with James McGreevey, the governor of New Jersey, which means that the governor of New Jersey can veto anything that happens on the site, a power that, curiously, the mayor of New York lacks. The Port Authority is an immense bureaucracy that has traditionally operated in private, away from the glare of press and publicity. It is used to controlling information, not to being the subject of public scrutiny, and it is certainly not in the habit of dealing with internationally famous architects who are accustomed to telling their clients what to do.

When Alex Garvin upped the architectural ante, the Port Authority decided it needed an architectural consultant of its own, and it hired Stanton Eckstut, an urban designer with whom Garvin has had a somewhat tense relationship. Eckstut—who was one of the principal planners of Battery Park City—and Garvin are supposed to work together to evaluate the new architectural proposals, and to come up with a preliminary plan by the beginning of February. But Eckstut has been busy making plans of his own, and he thinks that the Port Authority has had an unfair rap as an opponent of good architecture. "It gets blamed for everything," he said to me.

There are other people with their own plans, too. The Civic Alliance, a consortium of groups organized by the Regional Plan Association, is probably the most important. The group put together the Javits Center meeting last July, and the morning after the Winter Garden presentations it held a press conference to criticize the L.M.D.C. program and to unveil the results of a workshop on the future of Lower Manhattan. Scenarios were proposed for a "livable neighborhood," a "creative hub," and a "global office" center.

Larry Silverstein and Frank Lowy—the chairman of Westfield, a huge shopping-mall company that leased the Trade Center's retail space—believe that their leases give them the right to rebuild, and the Port Authority has said it intends to honor them. Silverstein and Westfield are the beneficiaries of insurance policies on the twin towers that could pay them between three and a half and seven billion dollars for their loss. If they get the larger amount—the matter is in litigation—they will have so much money that they could pay for new skyscrapers all by themselves, without borrowing a cent, although the L.M.D.C. and the Port Authority would retain control over the designs.

The one political figure who could cut through the morass of competing interests is Governor Pataki, but he has shown little interest in doing so. In fact, if any public official has demonstrated imagination about the future of downtown, it is Mayor Bloomberg. A week before the presentations at the Winter Garden, Bloomberg delivered a speech to the Association for a Better New York, a business group, in which he laid out what he called the city's "vision" for Lower Manhattan. Bloomberg's talk was the first time a New York City mayor had made a major address on the subject of urban design since John Lindsay, and it was remarkably sophisticated for a public official. "Lower Manhattan's competition to be a global center isn't just midtown, or even Chicago or Los Angeles," Bloomberg said. "Increasingly, it is London and Berlin and Hong Kong." The Mayor dared to criticize the original World Trade Center as a misguided idea, and he said that the future of Lower Manhattan was not as a commercial district alone. Bloomberg imagined new housing, waterfront developments on the East River, and new rapid-transit connections between Lower Manhattan and the airports. He said he wanted to turn West Street into a promenade lined with seven hundred trees, "a Champs-Élysées or Commonwealth Avenue for Lower Manhattan," and he proposed a new park over the entrance to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel.

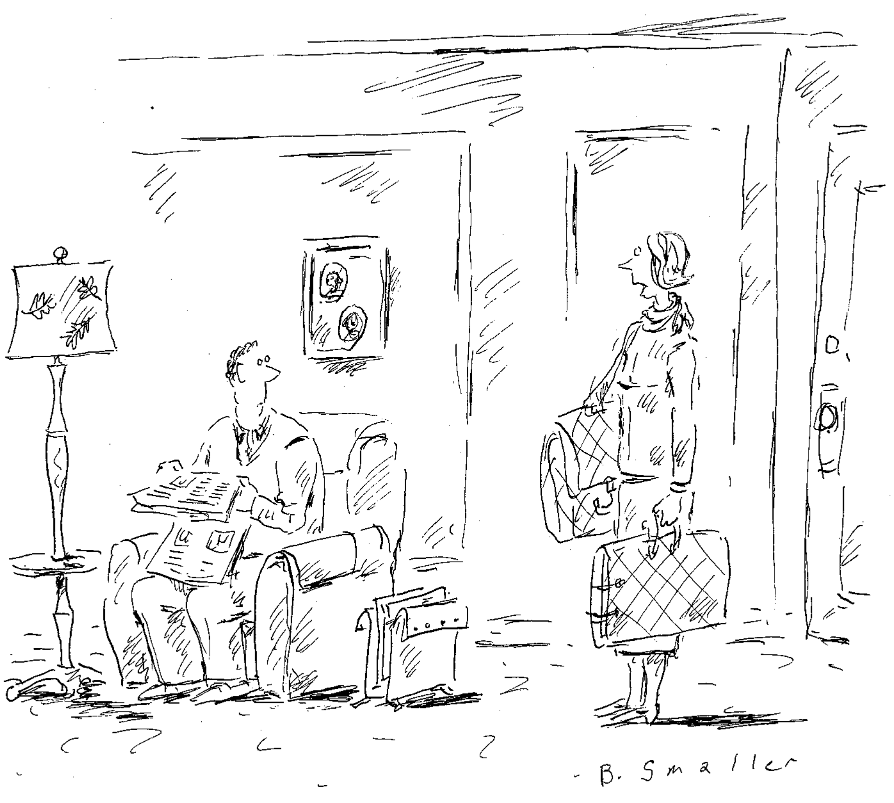
The speech was a clever move politically. Bloomberg didn't criticize the Governor, but by positioning himself as the man with the plan, he made it impossible to miss the contrast with the Governor. Bloomberg's speech was largely the work of Daniel Doctoroff, the deputy mayor who cheered on the naysayers at the Javits Center last July. Doctoroff has been determined to reclaim some power for the city over Ground Zero. Last summer, he floated the idea of trading the New York City airports, which the Port Authority operates but the city owns, for the Port Authority's sixteen acres at Ground Zero, a deal that would take the Port Authority mostly out of the business of planning the Trade Center site. The land swap, which the Mayor mentioned in his speech, remains a possibility, although no serious negotiations have taken place lately. The Port Authority makes more money from the airports than it ever did from the World Trade Center, and that gives the city a strong bargaining chip. Doctoroff likes to look at the city in terms of bold strokes. He conceived the idea of bringing the Olympics to New York, and he hired Alex Garvin to come up with a physical plan to make the Olympics work throughout the five boroughs. Ever since then, Garvin and Doctoroff have been close. Many of the ideas put forth in Bloomberg's speech are things that Garvin has been promoting.

The planning process, which seemed to move so slowly for so many months, is now on an accelerated timetable. But Alexander Garvin and Stanton Eckstut have to see eye to eye over the coming weeks, and the tension between the L.M.D.C. and the Port Authority, which has burst out into the open several times over the past year, will have to be kept in check. ("I could take any of these schemes and do a plan from it," Eckstut said to me, whereas Garvin says he thinks that a couple of them will not work at all, although he will not say which.) Both men have said that they do not expect the final plan to replicate any of the proposals exactly, and Garvin has raised the possibility of choosing one architect's master plan and asking another architect to design one or more of the buildings for it. Once the agencies decide on a course of action, Governor Pataki, who continues to have the most power here; Governor McGreevey, who still has some power through the Port Authority; Mayor Bloomberg, who is moving toward taking a bigger role at Ground Zero; and Larry Silverstein and Westfield will all have to agree to it.

None of the plans, it should be said, take into account the forces of the real-estate market, which at the moment is so depressed that a builder would have to be crazy to put up so much as a single square foot of office space in Lower Manhattan. The neighborhood has been losing its status as the prime financial center for more than half a century; after the destruction of the World Trade Center, several large financial concerns, like Lehman Brothers, abandoned the area altogether. (Thirty-seven of Lehman's forty floors in the World Financial Center are still empty.) And since businesses have increasingly come to believe that they should decentralize their operations in the name of security, even those companies interested in remaining in Lower Manhattan aren't likely to want more space very soon. Still, real estate does work in long cycles, and there is no question that better transit access, waterfront development, and more housing and cultural facilities would make Lower Manhattan a much stronger competitor to midtown Manhattan and even to New Jersey. No one thinks that a substantial amount of new office space will be added for a decade.

In the meantime, another member of the L.M.D.C., Anita Contini, has been working on how to plan a memorial to the victims of the September 11th attacks. The architects in Garvin's program were not asked to design a memorial explicitly, but only a plan that would allow for one. A separate design competition for a memorial will be held later this year, and in preparation for it Contini has taken members of her staff and victims' families on tours of memorials around the country, including the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington and the memorial to the Oklahoma City bombing. She has also invited scholars and other experts to talk to the group about the meaning of memorials and their connection to architectural history.

But perhaps the memorial should not be thought of as a separate venture. Almost all the new Ground Zero plans are both memorials and master plans, and one lesson of this round of the design process may be that our culture creates too rigid and arbitrary a divide between sacred space and everyday space; after all, the great cathedrals of Europe were also marketplaces and community centers—focal points for every part of urban life. Are we still capable of experiencing a sense of awe at one moment and going about our business the next in the same place? The realities of the city are all around us on these sixteen acres, just as the memories are. ♦

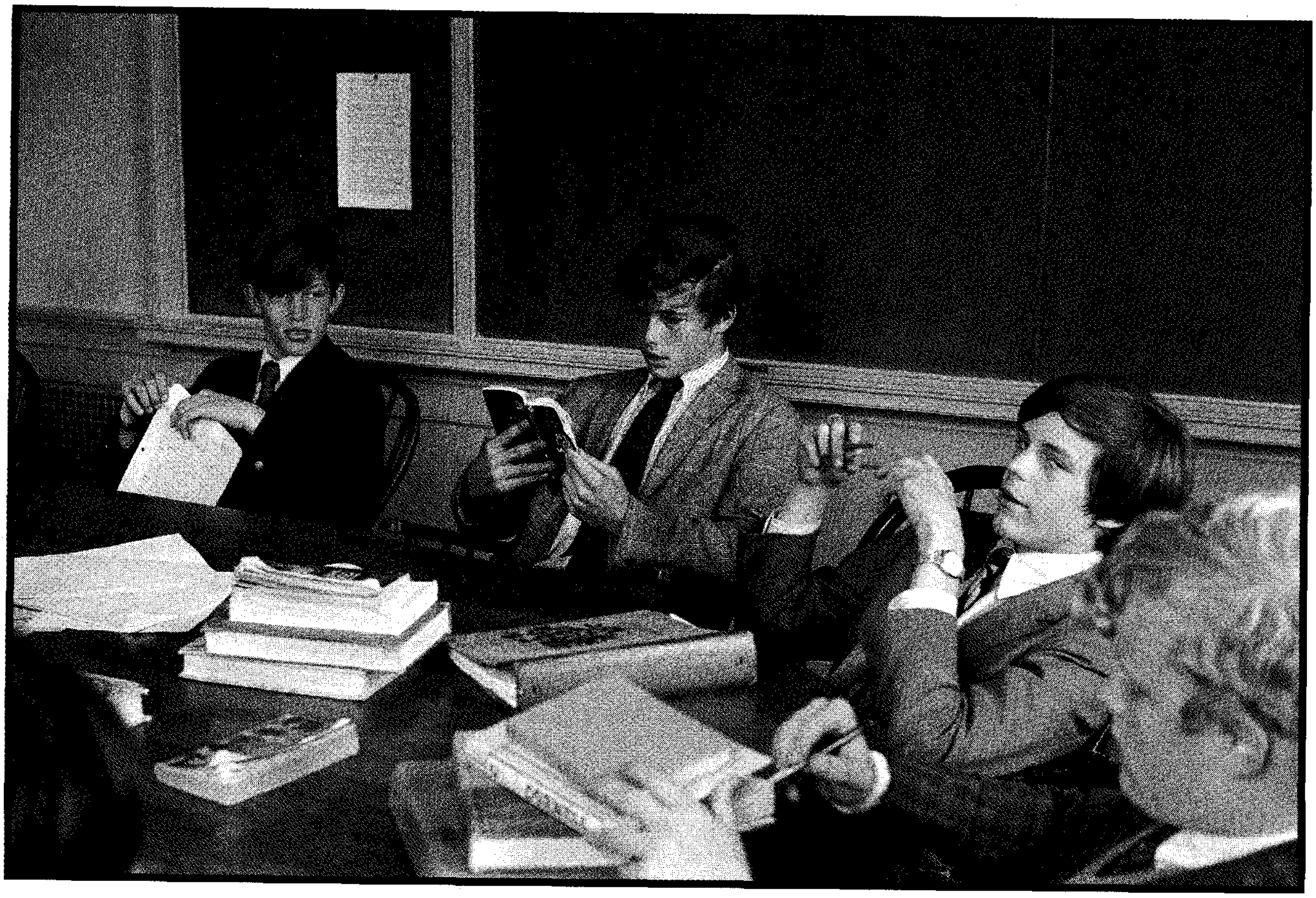


"I've decided to spend the rest of my life with someone else."

FICTION

CLASS PICTURE

BY TOBIAS WOLFF



CONSTANTINE MANOS/MAGNUM

Robert Frost made his visit in November of 1960, just a week after the general election. It tells you something about our school that the prospect of his arrival cooked up more interest than the contest between Nixon and Kennedy, which for most of us was no contest at all. Nixon was a straight arrow and a scold. If he'd been one of us, we would have glued his shoes to the floor. Kennedy, now—Kennedy was a warrior, an ironist, terse and unhysterical. He had his clothes under control. His wife was a fox. And he read and wrote books, one of which, "Why England Slept," was required reading in my honors-history seminar. We recognized Kennedy; we could still see in him the boy who would have been a favorite here, roguish and literate, with that almost formal insouciance that both enacted and discounted the fact of his class.

We would never have admitted that class played any part in our liking for Kennedy. Ours was not a snobbish school—or so it believed, and we wanted this to be true. It was understood that some of the boys might get a leg up thanks to their famous names or great wealth, but, if privilege immediately gave them a place, the rest of us liked to think that it was a perilous place; you could never advance in it, you could only try not to lose it by talking too much about the débutante parties you went to or the Jaguar you had earned by turning sixteen, and meanwhile, absent other distinctions, you were steadily giving ground to a system of honors that valued nothing you hadn't done for yourself.

Or that was the idea, an idea so deeply held that it was never spoken; you breathed it in with the smell of floor wax and wool and boys living close together in overheated rooms. Never uttered, so never challenged.

If our school had a snobbery it would confess to, it was its pride in being a literary place—quite aside from the glamorous writers who visited three times a year. Our headmaster had studied with Frost at Amherst and once published a collection of poems, "Sonnets Against the Storm," which it now pained him to be reminded of. Dean Makepeace had been a friend of Hemingway's during the First World War and was said to have served as the model for Jake's fishing buddy Bill in "The Sun Also Rises." The other English masters carried themselves as if they, too, were intimates of

Hemingway, and also of Shakespeare and Hawthorne and Donne. These men seemed to us a kind of chivalric order. Even boys without bookish hopes aped their careless style of dress and the ritual swordplay of their speech. And at the headmaster's monthly teas I was struck by the way the other masters floated at the fringe of the English masters' circle, as if warming themselves at a fire.

How did they command such deference—English teachers? Compared with the men who taught physics and biology, what did they really know of the world? It seemed to me, and not only to me, that they knew what was most worth knowing. Unlike our math and science teachers, who modestly stuck to their subjects, they tended to be polymaths. Adept as they were at dissection, they would never leave a poem or a novel strewn about in pieces like some butchered frog reeking of formaldehyde. They would put it back together with history and psychology, philosophy, religion; even, on occasion, science. Without pandering to your presumed desire to identify with the hero of a story, they made you feel that what mattered to the writer had consequence for you, too.

There was a tradition at my school by which one boy was chosen for a private audience with each writer who visited. We contended for this honor by submitting a piece of our own work (poetry if the visitor was a poet, fiction if a novelist), with the winner to be chosen by the writer a week or so before the visit. By custom, only sixth formers, boys in their final year of school, were allowed to compete. That meant that I had spent the past three years looking on helplessly as boy after boy was plucked from the crowd of suitors and invited to stroll between the headmaster's prize roses in the blessed and blessing presence of literature itself, to speak of deep matters and receive counsel, and afterward be able to say, You liked "By Love Possessed"? You're kidding. I mean, Jesus, you ought to hear Mary McCarthy on the subject of Cozzens. . . .

It was hard to bear, especially when the winning manuscript came from the hand of someone you didn't like or, worse, from a boy who wasn't even known to be a contender—though this had happened just once in my years of waiting in the wings, when an apparent philistine named Hurst won an audience with Edmund Wilson for a series of satirical odes in Latin. The visiting writers didn't know us, so no one could accuse them of playing favorites, but that didn't stop us from disputing their tastes. How could Robert Penn Warren, for instance, prefer Kit Morton's plain dying-grandmother story to Lance Leavitt's stream-of-consciousness monologue from the viewpoint of a condemned man smoking his last cigarette while pouring daringly profane contempt over the judgment of a world that punishes you for one measly murder while ignoring the murder of millions? It didn't seem right that Lance, who defied the decorums of language and bourgeois morality, should have to look on while Robert Penn Warren walked the garden with a sentimentalist like Kit (whose story, through its vulgar nakedness of feeling, had moved me to secret tears).

I'm not exaggerating the importance to us of these trophy meetings. We cared. And I cared as much as anyone, because I not only read writers; I read *about* writers. I knew that Maupassant, whose stories I loved, had been taken up when young by Flaubert and Turgenev; Faulkner by Sherwood Anderson; Hemingway by Fitzgerald and Pound and Gertrude Stein. All these writers were welcomed by other writers. It seemed to follow that you needed such a welcome, yet before this could happen you had somehow, anyhow, to *meet* the writer who was to welcome you. My idea of how this worked wasn't low or even practical; I never thought about making connections. My aspirations were mystical. I wanted to receive the laying on of hands that had written stories and poems, hands that had touched the hands of other writers. I wanted to be anointed.

Frost's visit was announced in early October. At first the news made me giddy, but that night I grew morose with the dread of defeat. I couldn't sleep. Finally I got up and sat at my desk with two notebooks full of poetry I'd written when taking a break from stories. While my roommate muttered in his dreams I bent over the notebooks and read piece after piece like:

song (#8)

to the hopeless of the hopeless of the
night
i sing my song and hopeless end my
song
and do not pity me for i am without
hope and
do not pity them for they are without
hope and

There the poem ended. Beneath it I had written "fragment." I'd written "fragment" beneath most of the poems in the notebooks, and this description was in every case accurate. Each of them had been composed in some fit of ardor or philosophy which deserted me before I could bring it to the point of significance. The few poems that I had finished seemed, in the hard circle of light thrown by the gooseneck lamp, even more disappointing. The beauty of a fragment is that it still supports the hope of brilliant completeness. I thought of stitching several of them together into a sequence, à la "The Waste Land," but that they would thereby become meaningful seemed too much to hope for.

I would have to write something new. The deadline for submission was three weeks away. I could write a poem in that time, but what kind of poem should I write? Aside from being good, it would have to stand out from the poems of my competitors, that was the problem. At least I knew (barring some dark horse like Hurst) who my competitors were.

There were three.

George Kellogg was the editor of our literary review, *Troubadour*, and a proficient writer, mainly of poetry. He wrote in traditional forms, especially the villanelle, and you could tell, reading his poetry, that he knew his stuff. His lines scanned, he used alliteration and personification. Metonymy. His poems always had a *theme* and were full of sympathy for the little people of the world: an old man picking his way across a fairground the morning after the fair; an old woman slowly gathering her things in a darkened theatre after everyone has left.

She dons her scarf, she dons her
balding fur;
She takes her time, 'til Time at last
takes her.

I didn't really believe that George would win. He had a certain mastery and he gave occasional intimations of power in reserve, but his poems bored me stiff. He seemed more professor than writer, with his hairy tweed cap and watch chain and slow, well-considered speech. The effect was less stuffy than dear, and that was his problem; he was too dear, too kind. I never heard him say a hard word about anyone, and it visibly grieved him when the rest of us made sport of our schoolmates. At our editorial meetings, he argued for almost every submission, even knowing that we could take only a fraction of them. It was maddening. You couldn't tell whether he actually liked a piece or just hated turning people down. George's benevolence did not serve his writing well. For all its fluent sympathy, it had no bite. Still, I knew better than to write George off. If he just once let a strong feeling get the better of his manners, he might land a hard one. He *might* win.

So might Bill White, my roommate. Bill had already written most of a novel, of which we'd published the first chapter in *Troubadour*. A surgeon and a famous actor and his wife are isolated in a hunting lodge during a blizzard. The men are old friends, but it emerges that the actor's wife is having an affair with the surgeon, who, it turns out, once saved the actor's life with an impromptu tracheotomy during a safari:

> Have to take my hat off to you, said Montague. Tricky bit of tradecraft, given the circumstances. Storm blowing the damned tent down, and the beaters into the liquor. I shan't forget it.
>
> Not at all, not at all, said Dr. Coates. The merest intern could have done as well—probably better.
>
> I shan't forget it, Montague repeated. I'm forever in your debt, he added coldly.
>
> Aren't we all, said Ashley, pouring herself another Scotch. She stared at the falling snow. What ever *would* we do without the good doctor's services?
>
> You bitch, said Montague. You perfectly beautiful bitch.

Bill hadn't let me read the rest of his novel but I doubted that the hunting party's meticulously described rifles would stay locked in their cases for long.

Bill was a contender. His characters were stilted but he had confidence, and his stories were eventful and closely detailed. Most of the work in *Troubadour* suffered from generality. Bill's talent was particularity. How the snow creaked underfoot on a very cold clear day, how the low white sun looked through a tangle of black branches. The tackiness of a just-oiled rifle stock, the sound of a bored woman brushing out her long hair in front of a fire. Everything in his work was specific and true except the people. That was a problem in the longer pieces, but in Bill's shortest, most implicit stories, and in his occasional poems, the exactitude and poise of his writing could carry you away. He had me worried.

So did Jeff Purcell, known as Little Jeff because we had in our class another Jeff Purcell, his cousin—Big Jeff. In fact, Little Jeff wasn't little and Big Jeff wasn't big, just bigger than Little Jeff, who resented Big Jeff, partly no doubt for inadvertently imposing this odious nickname on him. Little Jeff was a friend of mine, so, like his other friends, I called him Purcell.

Purcell habitually kept his arms folded across his chest, like a Civil War general in a daguerreotype. This bellicose pose suited him. Under his bristling crewcut, he cultivated a sulfurous gift for invective and contempt. He was the Herod of our editorial sessions, poised to strike down every innocent who presumed to offer us a manuscript. He had exacting standards: moral, political, aesthetic. Purcell even flouted the timeless protocol of pretending to admire the work of his fellow-editors. At one of our meetings, he declared that a story of mine called "Suicide Note" read as if it'd been written *after* the narrator blew his brains out.

Purcell came from a rich, social family, but you wouldn't have guessed it from his stories and poems; or maybe you would have. His subject was the injustice of relations between high and low. He had written a ballad about a miner being dispatched deep into the earth to perish in a cave-in while the mine owner hand-feeds filet mignon to his hunting dogs, cooing to them in baby talk; and his last *Troubadour* piece was an epistolary story in which a general writes congratulatory letters to various widows after sending their husbands to be slaughtered:

> You may rejoice for your fallen hero, knowing that his heart was perforated for our glorious cause, and you and your little ones can rest assured that his missing head, wherever it may be, is filled with the pride of sacrifice and radiant memories of the homeland for which he died so eagerly.

This story was, I felt sure, inspired by a certain passage in "A Farewell to Arms," but when it came up for consideration I bit my tongue and let it go. It wasn't bad. Cartoonish, of course, like all of Purcell's work, lurid and overwrought, but venomously alive. Anyway, I myself was in debt to Hemingway—up to my ears. So was Bill. We even talked like Hemingway characters, though in travesty, as if to deny our discipleship:

> That is your bed, and it is a good bed, and you must make it and you must make it well.
>
> Today is the day of meat loaf. The meat loaf is swell. It is swell but when it is gone the not-having meat loaf is tragic and the meat-loaf man will not come anymore.

All of us owed someone—someone, and more than someone. We wouldn't have admitted it in so many words, but the knowledge was surely there, because the charge of imitation was the only charge we never brought against the submissions we mocked so cruelly. There was no profit in it. Once crystallized, consciousness of influence would have been fatal to the collective and necessary fantasy that our work was purely our own. Even Purcell kept mum on the subject.

He was a threat. His attack was broad, even crude, yet if he humanized his targets, muted his voice, used a knife instead of a cudgel . . . But he didn't necessarily have to do any of that. In a field of stiffs, one of his cartoons could win for simply being alive.

These, then, were the boys who stood between me and Robert Frost. Of course there were other self-confessed writers in my form, but in our English classes and as an editor of *Troubadour* I'd read their work and I hadn't seen anything to worry me except their desire. So much desire! Why did so many of us want to be writers? It seemed unreasonable. But there were reasons, and one of them had to do with the problem of class.

Despite our school's hierarchy of character and deeds, class was a fact. It was not just the clothes a boy wore but the way he wore them. How he spent his summers. The games he knew how to play. His way of turning cold at the mention of money, or at the spectacle of ambition too nakedly revealed. You felt it as a depth of ease around certain boys, their innate, affable assurance that they would not have to struggle for a place in the world. A depth of ease or, in the case of Purcell and a few others, a sullen antipathy toward the padding that hemmed them in and muffled the edges of life; yet even in the act of kicking against it they were defined by it, and protected by it, and to some extent unconscious of it. Purcell himself had a collection of first editions you'd almost have to own a mine to afford.

Maybe that was why so many of us wanted to become writers. Maybe it seemed to us that to be a writer was to escape the problems of blood and class. Writers formed a tribe of their own and regarded the others from a position outside the common hierarchy. This gave them a power not conferred by privilege—the power to create images of the system they stood apart from, and thereby to judge it. We had talked in class about Pasternak and his troubles, and the long history of Russian writers being imprisoned or killed for not writing as the Party wished. Augustus Caesar had sent our Latin master's beloved Ovid into exile. Yet the effect of these stories was to make me feel not Caesar's power but his fear of Ovid. And why would Caesar fear Ovid, unless he knew that all his legions could not protect him from a good line of poetry?

The weekend before our Frost submissions were due, there was a fire at the school. Fire was the great nightmare. Early in the century, a residential house had burned to the ground with thirteen boys inside, and the fire was said to have been started by a cigarette. How anyone could know that, we didn't ask. It was revealed truth. And it led to a commandment: Thou shalt not smoke. Get caught and you were out, that day. Even the softest masters were without mercy on this point. A boy would return from swimming practice and find his roommate gone, hangers tinkling in an empty closet, the other mattress stripped and doubled over. No announcements made. No lessons preached.

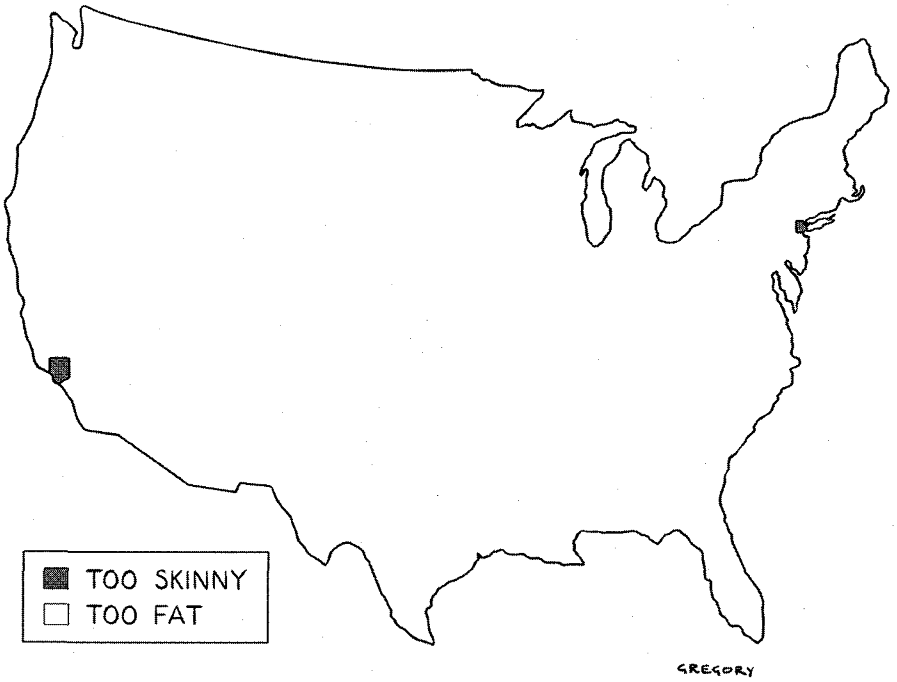
Despite this, an unteachable cadre of resolutes, including me, kept smoking anyway. I'd sneaked the occasional gasper since eighth grade but at school it became an obsession. I was crazy for cigarettes, yet my true addiction was to the desperate, all-or-nothing struggle to maintain a habit in the face of unceasing official vigilance. I smoked in freezers and storage lockers and steam tunnels. I joined the Classical Music Club so that I could smoke in the bathrooms of the concert halls we visited, and went out for cross-country so that I could smoke while running in the woods. I kept a store of spearmint Life Savers to mask my breath and used a holder so my fingers wouldn't stain. It was fretful, laborious work, but when I sucked down that first deep pang of smoke I went dizzy with pleasure.

Then I almost got caught. I'd been smoking in the basement of the chapel with another boy, who was discovered there by the padre just minutes after I left. I was putting music in the choir stalls—my chore that week—when the two of them came upstairs and walked down the aisle, the padre sad but decided, holding the boy by the elbow, and the boy . . . I could only glance at him, but I saw enough. He was in free fall, still trying to believe that he was only in a dream of falling. He lived in New York. It would be a long night's ride down on the train, alone. I could easily see myself on that train. My journey wouldn't stop in New York, though. I'd have to catch the gritty Century to Chicago, then change to the Great Northern—day after day of rolling past factories and fields and deserts and mountains but seeing none of it, gazing at my own stunned reflection in the glass. Lying sleepless in my bed that night, I saw the school as I would have seen it from an impossible distance, crossing the plains in a darkened railway car, headed back to the chaos and muddle I'd come from. I saw the school as if I were leaving it forever, and the thought made me sick at heart. I never smoked at school again.

But the temptation was persistent, and sometimes I could almost hear the old crew puffing away in the basements and attics. So my first thought when the sirens came wailing up the drive that Sunday afternoon was that one of those poor fiends had sparked a blaze somewhere and would pay the price that very hour. Who would it be?

I was coming out of the library. From the top of the steps I could see a thick braid of smoke twisting up over the old field house. I had been holed up most of the weekend, trying to finish my poem for the Robert Frost competition. What I'd been working on was a hunter's elegiac meditation over the body of an elk he's killed after tracking it for days through the mountains. This wasn't typical of my poems, abstract and devoid of narrative as they tended to be. It fell into the pattern of a group of my stories in which a young fellow named Sam evaded the civilizing demands of his socialite mother and logger-baron father by fleeing into the forests of Washington State, where he did much hunting and fishing and laconic romancing with free-spirited women he met on the trail. I had begun this series innocently enough, in unconscious tribute to the Nick Adams stories, but over time it had evolved into something less honest. I wanted to be taken for Sam by my schoolmates, who knew nothing of my life at home.

But I was having trouble with this poem. For one thing, how was the hunter, having followed the elk so far into the woods, going to get it out? How big was an elk, anyway? Really big, I



guessed. The hunter, having offered thanks to the spirit of the elk for giving him all that meat, was going to look ridiculous walking away with one lousy haunch over his shoulder. Maybe I should have made it a regular deer. But "deer" didn't have the majesty of "elk." There was a lot to fix, and not much time left to fix it. The poem was due the next morning.

A crowd was gathered at the near end of the football field. The firemen stood by their truck drinking coffee and taking turns with the hose. There were no flames, but the shingles had burned through at one end, exposing a sheet of charred sub-roofing that sent up a greasy hiss of smoke as the water played over it. I asked the boy next to me how the fire had started, and without taking his eyes off the field house he mumbled something about Jeff Purcell.

Purcell. The news gave me a knock because he was my friend, and because he had invited me to spend Thanksgiving vacation with his family in Boston, and now I could look forward to nothing better than another stretch with my boring grandfather and his boring wife in a housing development outside Baltimore.

False alarm! It wasn't my Purcell, Little Jeff, who'd started the fire. It was his cousin, Big Jeff. Big Jeff had a passion. He believed that our destiny was to leave Earth behind and colonize other planets. In fifth form, he had started the Rocket Club, and though he couldn't find any members in our class—we were too busy licking our chops for a great big bite of *this* planet—he did manage to recruit a few younger boys out of the Science Fiction Club. The Rocket Club met on the football field on Sunday afternoons under the eye of the chemistry master and shot off whatever they'd cooked up in the lab that week. Big Jeff had been experimenting with a two-stage rocket, but instead of going straight up the missile cut a few loops and took a dive onto the old field-house roof, where the explosive booster detonated in a clump of old pine needles and leaves. *Whoosh!*

I started a new poem that night. It was the fire that got me going, the fire and the firemen in their open rubber coats and high gaping boots, the looks they sneaked at us and the masters and the school itself, taking it all in. Their curiosity made me look around, too. For a moment, I saw this place as I had first seen it. How beautiful it was, and how odd. I felt its seclusion and the way we'd come to resemble each other in that seclusion. We dressed so much alike that the inflections we did allow ourselves (tasselled loafers for the playboy, a black turtleneck for the rebel) were probably invisible to an outsider. Our clothes, the way we wore our hair, the very set of our mouths marked us like tribal tattoos.

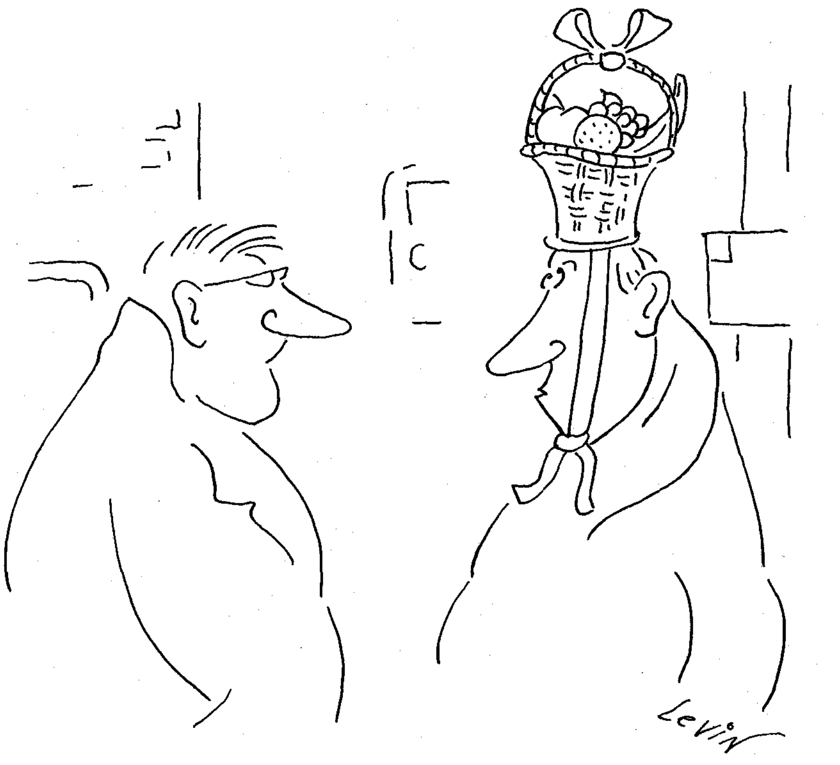
The firemen looked us over, and we looked them over. There was one fireman in particular I found myself watching. He had deep-set, tired-looking eyes, and held himself a little apart. He was less covert than the others in sizing us up. I thought about him after they had finished and driven away.

That was how I came to write my new poem, a narrative poem in which I described a fireman coming home the morning after a big blaze. He's been the hero of the night, braving walls of flame to rescue a little girl. Now it's over. He goes home, and it's Saturday morning and his kids are watching cartoons and his wife is talking on the phone. She waves and keeps talking. He fries himself some eggs but doesn't eat them. He's oppressed by the crumbs on the kitchen table, the dirty cereal bowls, the smell of burned toast and last night's fish. His wife laughs into the phone. The television is too loud. Then he's on his feet and in the living room and he's just yelled something, he doesn't know what, and his children are looking at him with dislike and contempt.

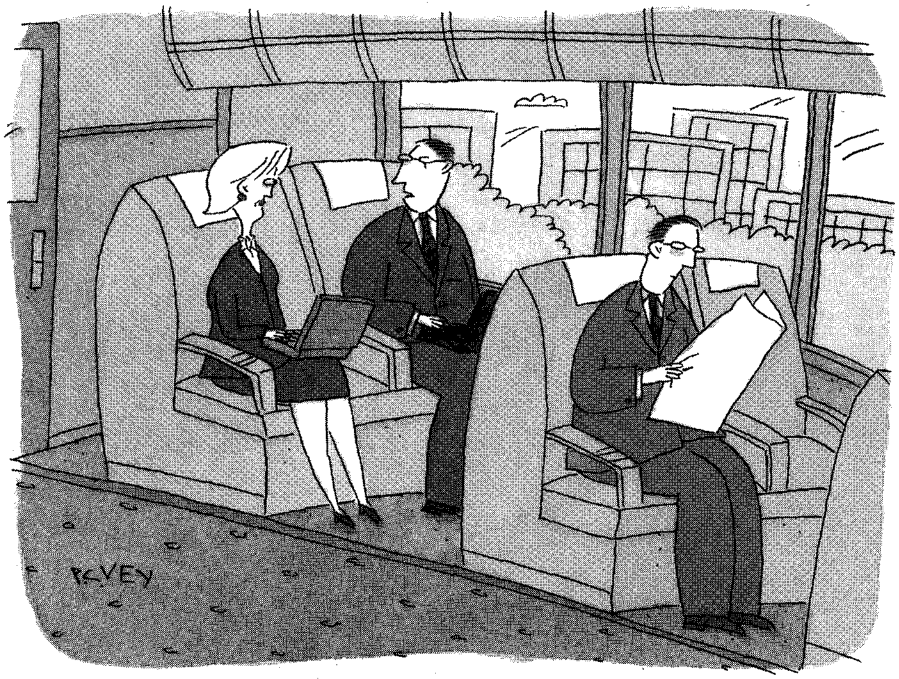
I thought writing should give me pleasure, and generally it did. But I didn't like writing this poem. I did it grudgingly, as if I had no choice, but in a kind of heat, too. In the end, I didn't submit it. Maybe it was good, maybe not. Maybe it wasn't even a poem, only a fragment of a story in broken lines. I couldn't tell. It was too close to home; it *was* home—the mess, the noise, the smells, all of this just like our place on a Saturday morning. The sense of time dying, drop by drop, of stalled purpose and the close, almost aquarium atmosphere of confinement and repetition. The convulsive, futile demand for recognition and respect. I could hear and see everything in that apartment, down to the pattern in the Formica tabletop. I could see myself there, and didn't want to. Even more, I didn't want anyone else to.

I submitted the elk-hunter poem. "Red Snow," I called it.

The day after John F. Kennedy won the Presidency, George Kellogg won the audience with Robert Frost. Our school newspaper printed his poem in a box on the front page. It was a dra-



"I really can't explain it too much except to say that it's part of a court order."



"Now that I've been let go, the commute is all I have."

• •

matic monologue in which an old farmer feels the bite of mortality on the first cold day of autumn. George had used an odd mixture of tones. At one point the farmer is lyrically drooling at the sight of a hired girl milking a cow:

Old rooster struts the rafters while the
barncat begs
Mewing at her feet in the stall where
Flossie stands,
As with swift hard strokes of her soft
white hands
She pulls the foaming cream into the
pail between her legs.

A few stanzas down he becomes a terse fatalist:

Corn's high in the silo, hay's stacked in
the loft,
Cordwood's halfway to the roof, door-
cracks plugged with clay.
So let come what will, hard ground,
short day,
I've done all I am able—and after all,
the snow is soft.

The poem was entitled, shamelessly, "First Frost."

In a telephone interview about the poem, Robert Frost told our reporter, "Young Kellogg has had some fun at this old man's expense, and I guess this old man can stand some fun, if it isn't too expensive." He seemed to think that George had written some sort of burlesque; that he was using the poet's manner and material—perhaps his very *name*—to give him the needle. He sounded like a man who'd been stung by a taunt, showing that he could take it and come back with some chaff of his own. But if anything stumped me more than Frost's thinking that George's poem was a dig in the ribs, it was the idea of the monumental Robert Frost letting some versifying teen get his goat. It didn't seem possible.

I read the poem several times. I began to imagine that maybe it *was* satiric, and thus better than I'd first thought. But George set me straight when I went to his room that afternoon to congratulate him. He was sitting on his bed. He still had his tie on, a knitted tie with a flat bottom. It looked crocheted; it looked like a doily. Our biology master wore ties like that, but George was the only boy you'd catch dead in one. Most of the scholarship students, myself included, took some care with the figure they cut. Not George. He was both the oldest and the youngest of us, the most fuddy-duddy and the most innocent.

What did you think of the poem, he asked me.

I told him I liked it. *Way to go!* Robert Frost, George, you're going to meet Robert Frost!

Did you think I was . . . how did Mr. Frost put it . . . having fun at his expense?

Well, I guess you could read it that way.

You could? Nuts. He slumped like a puppet.

But you don't have to, I said. You can also read it as tribute. You know, the farm, the folksy tone, the snow. It's like you're paying your respects to him—tipping your hat, so to speak.

Exactly! That's exactly the way I meant it. As an *hommage*, he added.

And, of course, the title, I said.

You like the title?

All those layers of meaning. "First Frost" as in, literally, the first frost of the year. Then "First Frost" in the symbolic sense, here comes winter; i.e. death, but also *rest*, right? The snow is soft, *after all*, after all the hard work he's spent his life doing—soft and white like the girl's hands. *After all*, in a funny way, he's gonna get what he wants. Unless I'm just reading this stuff into it. . . .

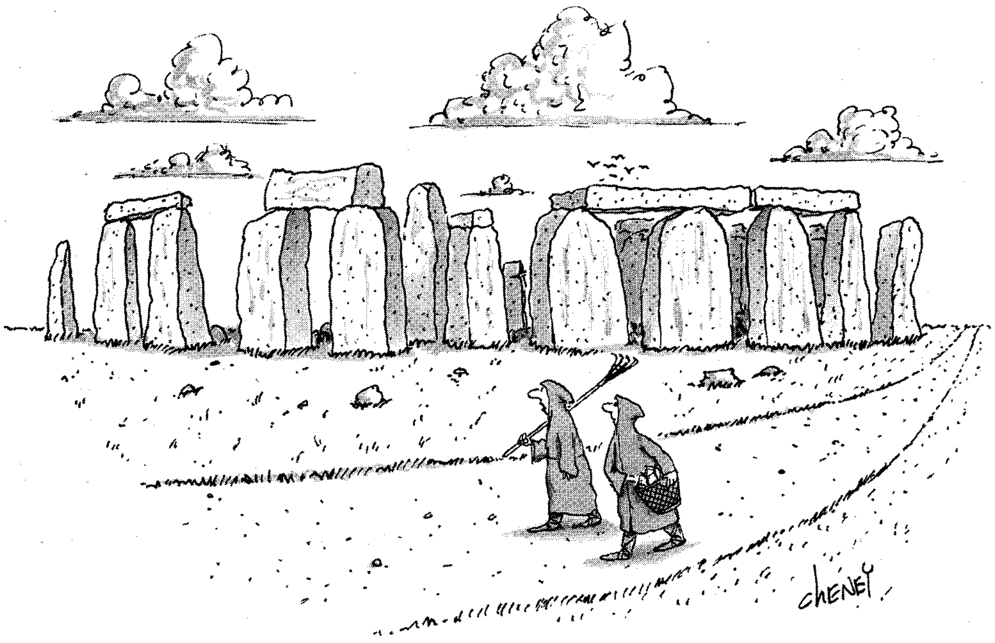
No! No, it's all there.

Then, I said, the crowning touch. "First Frost" as in First, Frost—as in Frost is tops, Frost is the best, Frost is literally No. 1.

Exactly! Exactly.

Robert Frost arrived at the school during dinner. When he appeared in the dining hall, slowly crossing from the side door with the headmaster, gingerly mounting the two steps to the high table, the ordinary din of the hall died almost to silence. We kept eating and tried not to stare, but we couldn't help ourselves. Frost let himself down into the chair at the headmaster's right, facing out toward the hall. He bent his big white head as he arranged his napkin, taking his time. He seemed deeply absorbed in the problem of the napkin. Then Dean Makepeace rose at the head of his table, turned toward Robert Frost, and began to clap in a measured, decorous way, each report of his hands sharp as a shot, and the rest of us jumped to our feet in a great scrape of chairs and made the hall thunderous with applause and the rhythmic drumming of our feet on the oaken floor. Frost gave a little bow with his head, but we kept the racket up, and finally his reserve broke and he smiled boyishly and rose partway in his chair and waved his napkin at us like a flag of surrender.

I was conscious of him through the rest of the meal, and held myself as though he



"It's a pity they had to stop work on the new mall."

were conscious of me. Some of the other boys at my table also suffered fits of dignity. The atmosphere in the hall had become theatrical. This had everything to do with Frost himself. There was an element of performance in his bearing—even the business with the napkin, awkward as it seemed, had a calculated quality. It charged the room and put us on edge, not at all unpleasantly—as if a glamorous woman were eating alongside us.

Frost read in the chapel that night. The headmaster climbed the steps to the pulpit to introduce him. He was a lanky, long-faced man with a wen over his right eyebrow. It was a big blistery-looking thing and when you first met him you could see nothing else, but he soon distracted you by holding your eyes with his, deep-set and attentive, and with the arresting beauty of his voice. He had a profound bass full of gravel, which he used to good effect and to his own satisfaction. I had expected him to use this moment to take a swipe at the Ginsberg-Ferlinghetti crime family, which had a few soldiers among us. But no. Instead, the headmaster told a story of how, as a farm boy who'd never been interested in poetry, he had idly picked up his teacher's copy of "North of Boston," and read a poem entitled "After Apple-picking." He'd approached it, he said, in a surly humor. He'd done more than a bit of apple-picking himself and was sure that this poem would try to make it fancy and romantic and get it all wrong. But what struck him first was how physically true the poem was, even down to that ache you get in the arch of your foot after standing on a ladder all day—not only the ache but the lingering pressure of the rung. And, once he had assented to the details, he was drawn to the poem's more mysterious musings. What was that pane of ice about? Which part of the poem was dream, and which part memory? He borrowed the book, never suspecting where this act would lead him. Make no mistake, he said: a true piece of writing is a dangerous thing. It can change your life.

He came back down the steps. That was all. No recitation of Frost's honors and awards, no witty, polished reminiscences. I had never before heard the headmaster speak of himself in this way, as someone with a particular past, and never did again. He was a mystery to us, and, like great generals and actresses, he guarded his mystery like the power it was.

He helped Robert Frost up the winding steps and then joined us in the pews. This left Frost alone at the front of the church. He arranged his books and some loose papers in a certain order, then rearranged them. The papers rustled loudly under the microphone. At this, he stopped and inspected the mike as if the device were new to him. He tapped it suspiciously. The tap made a resounding knock and he shied back a little. He picked up a book, rifled through the pages, set it down again. He peered out at us.

Can you hear me? You can hear me, you boys in the back? Well then. Good. That's good. I suppose I should read you a poem. But I was just thinking about something Shelley said . . . you know, Shelley, fellow who wrote "Ozymandias"—it's in your books. Friend of Byron, friend of Keats. Anyway, Shelley liked to say that we poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. They used to speak like that in those days—by the pound. Unacknowledged legislators of mankind. Wonder if it's true. Wonder what it *means*. Does it mean we're dangerous, like your headmaster says? What does your man Kellogg think? Is Mr. Kellogg here tonight?

Frost waited, gazing out at us until George stood up, a couple of seats to my right. He looked furtive and damp. He looked like a sinner in a Last Judgment painting, about to get his due.

And Frost, Frost looked like Himself up there in the pulpit. He was standing below one of the chandeliers, whose wintry light silvered his hair and made shadows on his weathered face. He didn't look old; he looked eternal.

He took George in. So, he said. Mr. Kellogg. That was quite a piece of legislation you wrote. Bet you had some fun with it, too, holding the old man's feet to the fire. Good for you, good for you. Old men should have their feet held to the fire—keeps 'em awake. All right, boys, they've brought me down here to sing for my supper, so I'd better do some singing. I wrote this one when I was lonely for home, many years ago, in England. I expect you boys know about homesickness. It's called "Mending Wall."

He lowered his eyes to read, and George wilted back into the pew.

Something there is that doesn't love a
 wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell
 under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the
 sun

Frost picked his way slowly through the first line, as if the thought were just occurring to him. And then his dry voice filled like a sail and became good-humored and natural and young. He was good at masking his eyes under those hanging brows of his, but now and then I saw him shift his gaze from the page to us without losing a word. He wasn't reading; he was reciting. He knew the poems by heart, yet he continued to make a show of reading them, even to the extent of pretending to lose his place or have trouble with the light.

His awkwardness took nothing from his poems. Rather, it removed them from the page and put them back in the voice, a speculative, sometimes cunning, sometimes faltering voice. In print, under his great name, the poems had the look of inevitability; in his voice you caught the hesitation and perplexity behind them, the sound of a man brooding them into being.

Frost read on, poem after poem, until the underclassmen began to cough and set their pews groaning. Then he raised his head and took us in. You boys are champion sitters, he said. You've got *Sitzfleisch*, as our great new friends the Germans would say. That's enough for one night, eh? Maybe just one more, what do you think, for your man Kellogg. Yes? All right then. I have just the poem here.

Still looking at us, Frost recited "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Then he gathered his books and papers while we applauded. The headmaster went up the steps, conferred with Frost, came down again and raised his hand for silence. He told us that Mr. Frost had agreed to take a few questions, if we had any.

I had questions. How did he know he was a good writer all those years when nobody else knew? What did it feel like to write something really great? Why did he choose George's poem?

Sir, if I may.

I looked around. It was Mr. Ramsey, one of the masters. He was standing in his pew. Even in this dimness his chubby cheeks showed their youthful English bloom. Mrs. Ramsey plucked at something on her sleeve. He had married her four years earlier out of some Southern women's college where he'd taught right after leaving Oxford. She was just a freshman at the time and Mr. Ramsey lost his job and brought her north to Putney and then to us. Mrs. Ramsey worked in the library and never lacked for boys needing help. She wore her honey-colored hair in long girlish braids, and she had a teasing way with us. She looked at us as if she knew what we were thinking. She had still been in love with Mr. Ramsey when they'd arrived two years back. We had all seen it. She'd hung on his voice, quoted his pronouncements. Lately, this had changed. I'd seen her look bored at dinner, while Mr. Ramsey was going on about something. On occasion, she turned away while he was still talking and began to chat with the boy next to her.

Your work, sir, Mr. Ramsey said, follows a certain tradition, shall we say, a *formal* tradition, as in that last poem you read, "Stopping in Woods." I wonder—

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Frost said. He put both hands on the pulpit and peered at Mr. Ramsey.

Yes, sir. Now that particular poem is not unusual in your work for being written in stanza form, with iambic lines connected by rhyme.

Good for you, Frost said. They must be teaching you boys something here.

There was a great eruption of laughter, more caustic than jolly. Mr. Ramsey waited it out as Frost looked slyly around the chapel, the lord of misrule. He was not displeased by the havoc his mistake had caused, you could see that, and you had to wonder if it was a mistake at all. Finally he said, You had a question?

Yes, sir. The question is whether such a rigidly formal arrangement of language is adequate to express the modern consciousness.

Modern consciousness, Frost said. What's that?

Ah! Good question, sir. Well—*very* roughly speaking, I would describe it as the mind's response to industrialization, the saturation propaganda of governments and advertisers, two world wars, the concentration camp, the dimming of faith by science, and, of course, the constant threat of annihilation. Surely these things have had an effect on us. Surely they have changed our thinking.

Surely nothing, Frost said. He stared down at Mr. Ramsey. Don't tell me about science, he went on. I'm something of a scientist myself. Botany. You boys know what tropism is? That's what makes a plant grow toward the light. Everything aspires to the light. You don't have to chase down a fly to get rid of it—you just darken the room and leave a crack of light in a window, and out he goes. Works every time. We all have that instinct . . . that aspiration. Science can't—what was the word? *dim*?—science can't dim that. All science can do is turn out the false lights in the room so the true light can get us home.

Mr. Ramsey began to say something, but Frost kept going. So don't tell me about science, he said, and don't tell me about war. I lost my nearest friend in the one they call the Great War. So did Achilles lose his friend in war, and Homer did no injustice to his grief by writing about it in dactylic hexameters. There've always been wars, and they've always been as foul as we could make them. It is very fine and pleasant to think ourselves the most put-upon folk in history, but then everyone has thought that from the beginning—it makes a grand excuse for all manner of laziness. But about my friend. I wrote a poem for him. I still write poems for him. Would you honor your own friend by putting words down anyhow, just as they come to you—no thought for the sound they make, the meaning of their sound, the sound of their meaning?

He broke off and let his eyes roam over the room.

I am thinking of Achilles' grief, he said. That famous grief . . . that terrible grief. Let me tell you boys something. Such grief can *only* be told in form. Maybe it only really exists in form. Form is everything. Without it you've got nothing but a stubbed-toe sort of cry, sincere maybe, for what that's worth, but with no depth or carry. No echo. You may have a grievance, but you don't have grief, and grievances are for petitions, not poetry. Does that answer your question?

I'm not sure—but thank you for having a go at it.

You wouldn't have guessed, seeing Mr. Ramsey settle back with a smile, that he'd just been stepped on by Robert Frost in front of the whole school. He had been my fifth-form English teacher and though I hadn't liked him I had found him interesting, as I had found his question to Frost interesting. But many of his students thought him a humbug for his high diction and unyieldingly intellectual tone. They had surely enjoyed this little show.

The headmaster stood and led us in a last storm of applause and then we filed out of the chapel into a hard, freezing wind. I asked George if he was headed to Blaine Hall, where it was rumored that Robert Frost might drop by for a cup of mulled cider with the English Club. No, George said. He was going back to his room.

Why? Scared he'll give you the business? He was just teasing you, George.

He shook his head. Mr. Frost really thinks my poem is some kind of mockery of his work.

He's the one who chose it. If it bothered him, why did he choose it?

I don't know why Mr. Frost chose my poem, he said. But he seems out of sorts about it.

What the hell. You can clear things up with him when you have your audience tomorrow.

If I have my audience.

What, you think he'll blow you off?

I didn't say that.

George. Hold up. Hold up!

We stopped on the path. The line of boys shuffled past us. A derelict kite flapped frantically in a tree. George looked away from me, tweed hat pulled low on his head, back to the wind. I think I'm coming down with something, he said.

George, you can't stand up Robert Frost.

It wouldn't count as standing him up if I was in the infirmary.

You chickenshit. You big baby.

George hunched deeper into his coat, hands jammed in the pockets.

You don't stand up Robert Frost, I said. This is something special. This is something to tell your kids about. Your grandkids!

He won't mind. He'll be glad.

George. This is really dumb. Where are you supposed to meet him, anyway?

Headmaster's parlor.

When?

After breakfast, George said, then he turned and looked at me. Why?

Just wondered. Are you really going to back out?

I don't know.

It'd be a complete waste if you backed out. I mean, he's *here*, George. Robert Frost is here. This is the chance of a lifetime. He's what, eighty-six, eighty-seven years old. It's now or never.

I understand that.

So are you going to back out? Because if you are, there's no point in a chance like that going to waste.

I saw George begin to understand me. This has nothing to do with you, he said.

I'm just saying, why throw a chance like this away? He's willing to spend some time with one of us. If *you* won't meet with him, let somebody else.

He didn't choose your poem. He chose my poem. Would you actually accept an honor you didn't earn?

Oh, like you *earned* it with those rhymes of yours? Please—we're not talking about "Paradise Lost" here.

George looked at me with cold curiosity. It unsettled me, but my blood was up and I couldn't stop myself. Would I accept a meeting with Robert Frost? I said. An *unearned* meeting, as opposed to an *earned* meeting, like yours? You bet your sweet ass I would.

George turned and started across the quad.

I followed. Are you backing out or not?

He didn't answer.

Wait'll he gets you alone, you baby. He'll chop you into little pieces.

I stopped and watched him bend into the wind, coattails streaming.

Robert Frost didn't turn up in Blaine Hall that night, but Mrs. Ramsey did. Her solitary entrance put everyone on alert; it was as though a song were going up an octave. Faculty wives didn't attend such gatherings without their husbands, and as the adviser to the English Club Mr. Ramsey was supposed to serve as host. Mrs. Ramsey said that he had a touch of the flu, and wanted her to stand in for him, and pay his respects should Robert Frost appear. I heard her tell this to some masters and their wives as she carried a plate of cookies around the crowded room.

Bill White and I were standing by the fireplace when she approached us with the cookies. We each picked one, and as she repeated her brave little lie Bill reached out and took the plate from her and set it on the mantel. I was struck by his confidence. Somehow I didn't like it, but I liked the result—having Mrs. Ramsey linger with us.

She said she had seen Robert Frost read once before, when she was a student at Foxcroft, and afterward he had met with the *lit'ry* girls and talked about everything under the sun. He'd been very funny, which surprised her, though she supposed it shouldn't have, and a terrible flirt. Of course, he got plenty of encouragement.

The heat from the fire brought a flush to her face and made her perfume thicker, headier. She turned to Mr. Rice, an English master and a Southerner himself, who was tapping the ashes from his pipe into the fireplace. Do you think he'll come tonight? she asked.

Frost? I doubt it. He seemed pretty well played out, by the end there.

Shoot, she said.

Just then some of the boys started to sing, and others chimed in, the masters and their wives looking on tenderly. When I first arrived at the school I had wondered at the way a bunch of boys would suddenly give voice like this, on the bus coming home from a game, in a sound-swelling stone hallway. Now I knew the songs, too, and I quickened to those moments when we leaned together, watching each other for cues, and joined our voices.

The singers began to gather around the fireplace. Mr. Rice gave way and drifted back toward the other masters, but Mrs. Ramsey stayed with us and was soon surrounded by the chorus we'd become. She swayed to the music, laughing softly at a witty stanza, closing her eyes at a romantic line. She didn't so much listen to the songs as receive them,

IT WAS LIKE THIS: YOU WERE HAPPY

It was like this:
you were happy, then you were sad,
then happy again, then not.

It went on.
You were innocent or you were guilty.
Actions were taken, or not.

At times you spoke, at other times you were silent.
Mostly, it seems you were silent—what could you say?

Now it is almost over.

Like a lover, your life bends down and kisses your life.

It does this not in forgiveness—
between you, there is nothing to forgive—
but with the simple nod of a baker at the moment
he sees the bread is finished with transformation.

Eating, too, is now a thing only for others.

It doesn't matter what they will make of you
or your days: they will be wrong,
they will miss the wrong woman, miss the wrong man,
all the stories they tell will be tales of their own invention.

Your story was this: you were happy, then you were sad,
you slept, you awakened.
Sometimes you ate roasted chestnuts, sometimes persimmons.

—*Jane Hirshfield*

---

as if we were serenading her. And we *were* serenading her. She was a woman alone among us, eyes shining, color high, a pretty woman made beautiful by tribute of song. We could see our power to charm her and make her beautiful, and this gave boldness to our voices. It was exciting and not quite proper. When one of the masters called a halt to it after several numbers, pleading the lateness of the hour, we broke off as if coming out of a trance, hardly knowing where we were.

Mrs. Ramsey seemed a little dazed herself, and skittish. She collected some dirty cups and wandered back to the cider bowl, where I saw her in conversation with the Greek master's elderly wife. The next time I looked she was gone.

Frost never showed. I stayed until the end, even offered to help with the cleanup, but the wives stuffed my pockets with cookies and sent me packing.

After breakfast, I chanced some demerits and skipped my warm, easy chore—helping sort that morning's mail—to stand by the gate to the headmaster's garden. I kept my vigil for half an hour or so. No one came. I figured George had chickened out after all.

But I was wrong. We walked to our dorm together after dinner that night—George couldn't hold a grudge—and he told me he'd spent more than an hour alone with Frost in the headmaster's parlor. They'd started talking and never made it outside. Frost didn't say much about George's poem, not in so many words, anyway, but he recited a few of his own and gave George some pointers. He also gave him an inscribed copy of his "Complete Poems," and an invitation to drop by for a visit if he should ever find himself in Frost's neighborhood.

Ah, I said. Great.

We walked along. Then George said that Frost had left him with some advice.

What was that?

Do you know where Kamchatka is?

Not exactly. Alaska? Somewhere up there.

Mr. Frost told me I was wasting my time in school. He said I should go to Kamchatka. Or Brazil.

Kamchatka? Why Kamchatka? Why Brazil?

He didn't explain. He was going to, but then he had to leave.

Jesus. Kamchatka. *Kamchatka.*

Later that night I went to the library and looked up Kamchatka. It was a peninsula in the remote far east of the Soviet Union, on the Bering Sea. Very few people lived there. It was dark half the year so they couldn't grow much of anything. They lived on the salted meat of salmon and also of bears, which greatly outnumbered the people and proved a sorrow to the unwary. When the taiga wasn't frozen over, it swarmed with biting insects. There were many volcanos and they were active. The only picture in the Kamchatka entry showed two figures in parkas watching the top of a mountain being carried skyward on a fist of flame.

I closed the encyclopedia and sat listening to the wind rattle the mullioned panes behind me. What was it about Kamchatka, that a young writer should forsake his schooling and go there? Spectacle, maybe. The drama of strange people living strangely. Danger. All this could be good matter for stories and poems. But Frost himself had lived in New England all his life at no cost to his art, and I wondered if he'd ever actually been there. I guessed not. But it meant something to him, Kamchatka, something to do with the writer's life, and what else could it mean but hardship? Solitude, darkness, and hardship. But he had also mentioned Brazil. I rose from my deep chair and crossed the room past boys dozing over books and exchanged the "K" volume for "B." ♦

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

HIGH STYLE

Writing under the influence.

BY JOHN LANCHESTER

When Oscar Wilde said that J. M.W. Turner had invented sunsets, he was joking, but he wasn't only joking. He meant that Turner had made the sunset into a subject of art, and therefore people were now looking at, talking about, and thinking about sunsets in a new way; thanks to Turner, all of us now see sunsets differently. In the parlance of contemporary critical theory—often a barbaric dialect, but sometimes a useful one—Turner invented the "discourse" of sunsets. It is in this sense that Marcus Boon, in his theory-afflicted but nonetheless lively study "The Road of Excess" (Harvard; $29.95), says that Thomas De Quincey, with the 1821 publication of "Confessions of an English Opium Eater," "invented the concept of recreational drug use." More precisely, De Quincey invented the discourse of recreational drug use: the whole way of thinking about drug-taking as a hobby and an escape into what Baudelaire, writing about drugs in 1858, was to call our "artificial paradises." What's nice about that phrase of Baudelaire's is the way it packs three ideas into two words: that drugs are "paradise," i.e., they make you feel good; but that the paradise is fake; and that, in any case, paradise was a place we were expelled from. Drugs can be fun, but they ruin people's lives. This we know.

The hundred and eighty years since De Quincey's invention have seen a great expansion in the pharmacopoeia, especially since 1862, when the drug company Merck began to produce cocaine. (One of its great early advocates was an ambitious young Viennese doctor named Sigmund Freud, who claimed, among other things, that "repeated doses of coca produce no compulsive desire to use the stimulant further; on the contrary one feels a certain unmotivated aversion to the substance." Yeah, right.) Diamorphine, also known as heroin, was first synthesized for commercial use in 1897. The men who discovered it, Felix Hoffman and Arthur Eichengrun, had also, a couple of weeks earlier, invented aspirin; for some years, heroin could be bought over the counter and aspirin required a prescription. Professional ironists love drug history.

Then we had barbiturates, beginning with Veronal, in 1903, and amphetamines, which Smith, Kline first put on the market under the trade name Benzedrine, in 1932. Cannabis became increasingly popular after Prohibition began, in 1919; the first attempt to ban peyote came in 1921 (this being an important benchmark of a drug's popularity); Albert Hoffman's account of LSD came out in 1947; PCP, or "angel dust," went on the market as an anesthetic under the trade name Sernyl in 1959; amyl nitrite became popular during the nineteen-sixties. MDMA, also known as Ecstasy, began to be used in the seventies. More recently, drugs such as GHB (a synthetic version of gamma-hydroxybutyrate, a chemical that occurs naturally in the brain) and ketamine (a derivative of PCP used as an animal anesthetic) have enjoyed vogues. Boon tells us that ketamine, a popular drug in the world of raves and electronic dance music, "synergizes with the sonic battery of the disco sound system to produce 'K-holes,' sudden black-outs of consciousness on the dance floor." A drug that gives you a good time in the form of amnesia . . . Gosh, what entertainment. And this is to consider only the drugs whose use is illegal, and not the tranquillizers and antidepressants that are daily being prescribed and taken in enormous quantities: Valium and Prozac, Xanax and Seroxat, Ativan and Librium, and all the rest.

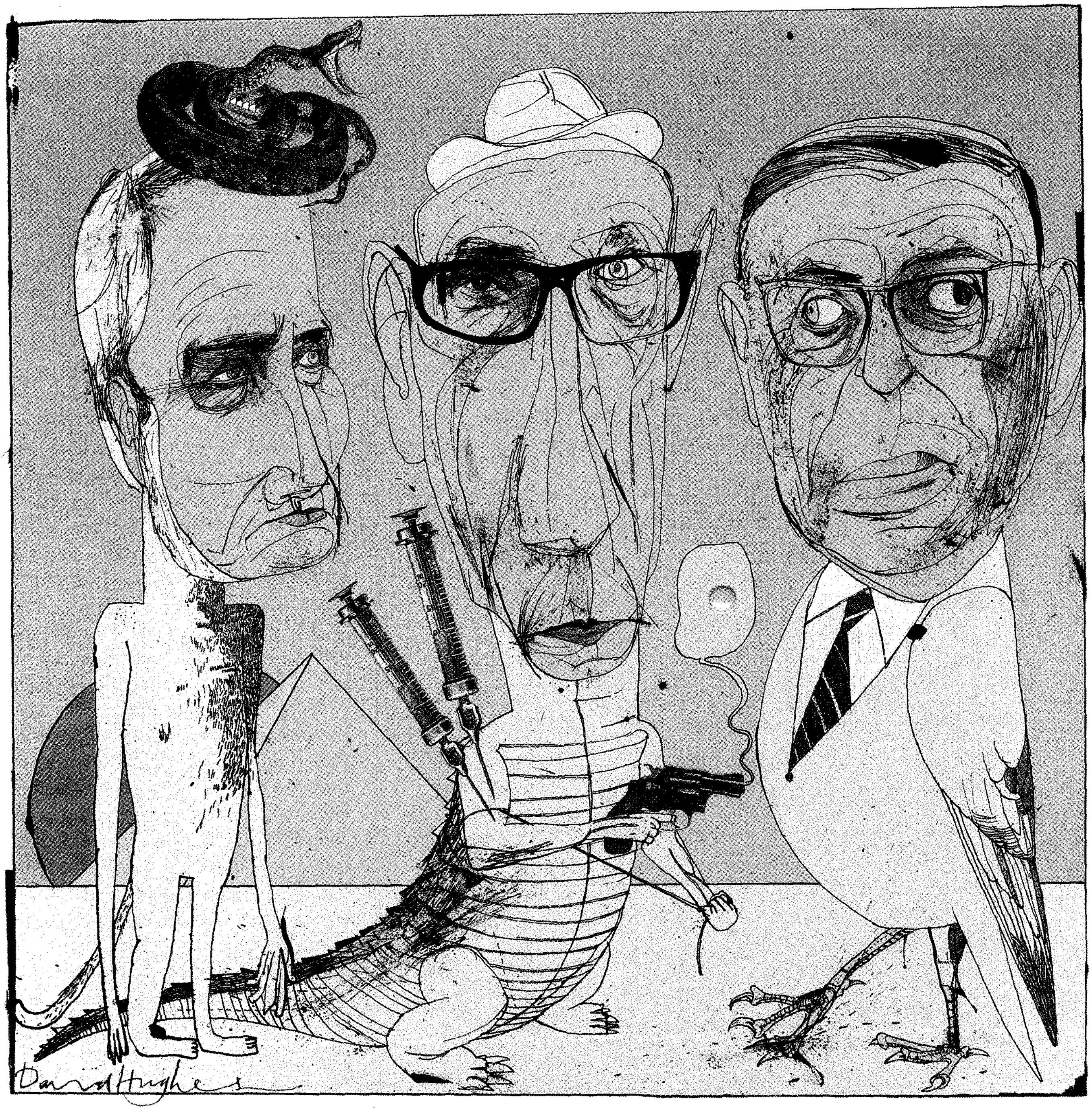
There is no question that the modern era has been a heroic period for the invention and ingestion of pharmaceuticals. And writers have taken all these drugs, often in heroic quantities. So where are the literary results? "Psychedelic" means "mind-manifesting." Where, then, are the manifestations? Where are the bodies of work that have come to us as a result of this explosive expansion of the pharmacopoeia, this unprecedented transformation of possibilities for tinkering with the mind's chemistry? Have drugs helped anyone to write anything that would have seemed surprising and new to the Prophet Ezekiel or William Blake?

Consider the following passage, from Jean-Paul Sartre's 1960 existentialist blockbuster "The Critique of Dialectical Reason":

> But it should be noted that this regulatory totalisation realises my immanence in the group in the quasi-transcendence of the totalising third party; for the latter, as the creator of objectives or organiser of means, stands in a tense and contradictory relation of transcendence-immanence, so that my integration, though real in the *here and now* which define me, remains somewhere incomplete, in the *here and now* which characterise the regulatory third party. We see here the re-emergence of an element of alterity proper to the statute of the group, but which here is still formal: the third party is certainly *the same*, the *praxis* is certainly common everywhere; but a shifting dislocation makes it totalising when I am the totalised means of the group, and conversely.

There are a number of valid responses to these arguments. One might be: They sure don't make public intellectuals like they used to. Another might be: I'm not sure Sartre's arguments constitute more than a footnote to his work in "L'Être et le Néant." A third might be: What was he on?

It's a good question. When he wrote the "Critique," Sartre, a lifelong caffeine



The prose of such writers as De Quincey, Burroughs, and Sartre bears the mark of the pharmaceuticals they favored.

fiend and serious drinker, was also frying his brains on corydrane, a form of amphetamine mixed with, of all things, aspirin. The philosopher was using corydrane on a daily basis, first to cut through the fug of the barbiturates he was taking to help him sleep—and he was having trouble sleeping not least because of all the corydrane he was putting away—but also to keep him at his desk, churning out the "Critique." "To put it briefly," he told Simone de Beauvoir some time later, "in philosophy, writing consisted of analysing my ideas; and a tube of corydrane meant 'these ideas will be analysed in the next two days.' " Or, as the Ramones used to put it, Gabba Gabba Hey.

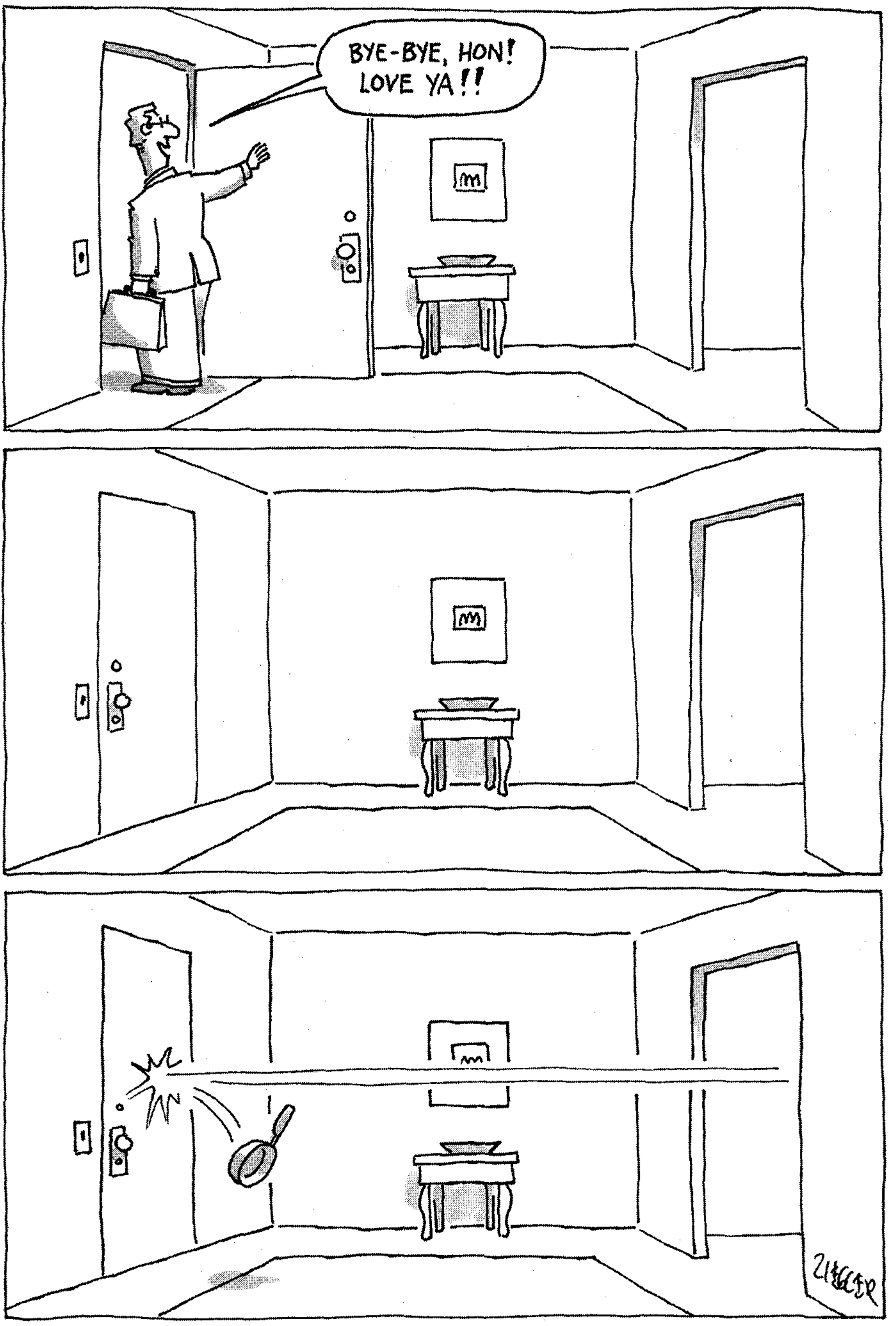
We hear a lot these days about drug abuse, but there is also such a thing as drug use—a utilitarian attitude to our body chemistry in which drugs are simply aids to productivity. That's how Sartre treated them, and Marcus Boon argues that "several of Sartre's works show the influence of speed," including "The Idiot of the Family," his incomplete and close to definitively unreadable five-volume study of Flaubert, and "Saint Genet," which, Boon relates, "began as a 50-page preface to Genet's writings, and ended up an 800-page book." Sartre was therefore a recognizable type of speed freak, the type dedicated to obsessive, unfinishable, and, to the neutral observer, pointless toil—the sort who, several hours after taking the drug, can usually be found sitting on the floor, grinding his teeth and alphabetizing his CDs by the name of the sound engineer.

Sartre is probably a bad advertisement for the effect of amphetamines as an aid to composition, but he is by no means the only example of a writer who used speed to help him work. For sheer

DAVID HUGHES

quantity, Boon notes, it is hard to beat Philip K. Dick, who from 1963 to 1964, under the influence of the methamphetamine Semoxydrine, wrote "eleven science fiction novels, along with a number of essays, short stories, and plot treatments in an amphetamine-fuelled frenzy that accompanied or precipitated the end of one of his marriages." (That "accompanied or precipitated" nicely captures how little fun it must have been to be Mrs. Dick.) If Philip K. Dick does not entirely convince on grounds of literary merit—and the books in question aren't quite his best material—then how about Graham Greene, who was pounding Benzedrine when he wrote his 1939 travel book about Mexico, "The Lawless Roads," and the novel that came out of his Mexican travels, "The Power and the Glory"? (The paranoid and menacing atmosphere of that superb novel, which describes a whiskey priest being hunted by Communist revolutionaries, surely owes something to Greene's pill-chugging.)

Perhaps the finest writer ever to use speed systematically, however, was W. H. Auden. He swallowed Benzedrine every morning for twenty years, from 1938 onward, balancing its effect with the barbiturate Seconal when he wanted to sleep. (He also kept a glass of vodka by the bed, to swig if he woke up during the night.) He took a pragmatic attitude toward amphetamines, regarding them as a "labor-saving device" in the "mental kitchen," with the important proviso that "these mechanisms are very crude, liable to injure the cook, and constantly breaking down."



Auden seems to have been the only unquestionably major writer to use drugs in quite this way, as a direct source of energy for his work. He represents the apotheosis of a utilitarian approach to drugs; and it is therefore logical, if he was going to take drugs, that he would gravitate toward speed, which is the utilitarian drug par excellence. By comparison, alcohol is a very bad working drug for writers. It is more or less impossible to write when drunk, which is just as well, given how much and how many writers drink; imagine the amount of booze they would put away if it actually helped.

The case of amphetamines is atypical, however, because most of the time writers take drugs not because they want to work but because they want to get high, or they want to unwind, or they want to, in Rimbaud's phrase, "systematically derange" all their senses. If they seem to take more of them than other people, it is perhaps because writers—since not many of them write for more than a few hours a day—tend to have quite a lot of spare time in which to be stoned and, just as important, hungover. It is also because some writers think that drugs will help them get ideas for later use. Whether these turn out to be good ideas or not is a trickier question. To look at this kind of drug use, and its literary consequences, we have to go back to the man who started all the trouble: Thomas De Quincey.

Born in Manchester in 1785, De Quincey was a brilliant student and career no-goodnick who dropped first out of Manchester Grammar School and then out of Worcester College, Oxford; it took him ten years to drift into journalism, and the series of articles that was to become the "Confessions." He was thirty-six. He knew he was special, but he hadn't done much to prove it except take large amounts of opium: up to three hundred and twenty grains a day, which his biographer, Grevel Lindop, calls a "heavy but not exceptional oral dose." (He took it in the form of laudanum, dissolved in alcohol, as people tended to in the nineteenth century.) In a sense, his opium-eating was his claim to distinction, which is among the things that make the "Confessions" such an uneasy piece of writing. Here is one of De Quincey's stoned reveries:

> I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by paroquets, by cockatoos. I ran into pagodas: and was fixed, for centuries, at the summit, or in secret rooms; I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshipped; I was sacrificed. I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva laid wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at. I was buried, for a thousand years, in stone coffins, with mummies and sphinxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids. I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud.

Wow! Yuck! Or at least that's how we're supposed to react. Like a freak-show barker, De Quincey stresses that we are sure to be appalled by the sights we are about to witness. The "Confessions" dwells on the horrors of opium in a way that seems close to boasting. Its author has gone places, seen things we wouldn't dare to; so the book pretends to be a warning, while also acting as something of an Advertisement for Myself. It gestures toward the squares who will be disgusted and repelled ("Guilt and misery shrink, by a natural instinct, from public notice," De Quincey tells us, at the start of his account), while also indicating to the hepcats that he's actually someone pretty special. He is inducted into a secret: "This is the doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium, of which church I acknowledge myself to be the only member." The hint of blasphemy is there to horrify some and to bring a knowing smile to others.

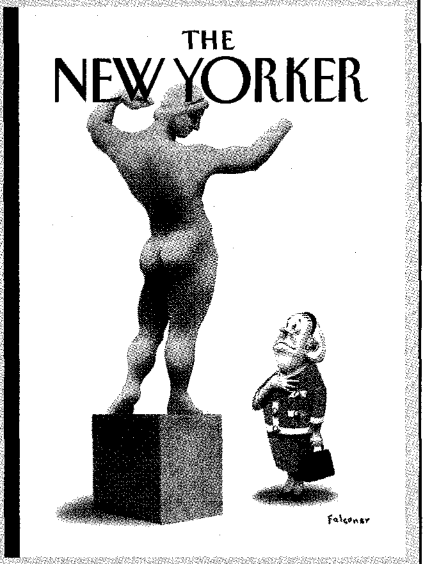
This double shuffle has been common to most drug writing ever since. On the one hand, the writers stress the horror of dope. On the other, they take pleasure in their own willingness to transgress, and their readers are usually taken as being complicit—cool enough to be with the writer, on the inside. There's an us and a them. It makes drug writing, which on one level purports to celebrate the fact that we are all chemically similar under the skin, one of the more snobbish kinds of literature, since it depends on the idea that, if everybody got it, it would have no point.

Most of the key texts of drug writing adopt this mixture of warning and boasting. They put you off even as they are pretending to put you on, and vice versa. This is not to say that they are bad books, although quite a few of them, including the "Confessions," have a status as classics that is not quite justified. William Burroughs's "Junkie," for instance, was first published, pseudonymously, in a 1953 pulp double edition with "Narcotic Agent," by Maurice Helbrant (tag line: "Gripping True Adventures of a T-Man's War Against the Dope Menace"). The horrify-the-squares tone of "Junkie" is closer to that of anti-dope trash than its admirers might like to admit:

> Doolie, sick, was an unnerving sight. The envelope of personality was gone, dissolved by his junk-hungry cells. Viscera and cells, galvanized into a loathsome insect-like activity, seemed on the point of breaking through the surface. His face was blurred, unrecognizable, at the same time shrunken and tumescent.

Burroughs is trying to seem deliberately matter-of-fact while not straying far from the Wow! Yuck! that De Quincey sought to evoke. But, then, both De Quincey and Burroughs were addicted to opiates, and perhaps there is something about taking these drugs which makes the consumer want to relate the experience of this affectless state, this zonked anomie. (It is present in other writing about this sort of addiction, such as that of Ann Marlowe in "How to Stop Time": "Making love on dope was like changing a tire under water.") It's also worth pointing out that neither Burroughs nor De Quincey was quite coming clean: both of them made out that they were writing after they had kicked their addiction, which was not true in either case. Burroughs was still on methadone at the time of his death, in 1997. A man in that position might well pretend to be feeling a little bit cooler than he actually was—especially in a situation where pretending to be cool was a big part of the whole enterprise.

Drug writing has always been on its firmest ground when it has a sense of humor. Hunter S. Thompson's "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" could never be accused of failing to horrify the squares, but at least it makes you laugh



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while doing so, and it also has one of the great opening sentences in American literature, the psychedelic generation's equivalent of "Call me Ishmael": "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold." The comedy of "Fear and Loathing" is a comedy of excess and distortion, in which Thompson's idea of a good time is careering around Las Vegas with a projectile-vomiting three-hundred-pound Samoan attorney—or is that his idea of a bad time? Both the humor and the distortion owe something to the fact that the drugs of choice in this case are psychedelics, principally LSD. Junkies don't have much sense of humor, but trippers do, at least some of the time; the fact that they aren't addicted presumably helps. It is a comedy carried over into more recent writing about drugs, such as the work of Irvine Welsh and Will Self. There is, always, that us-and-them snobbery, but there is the occasional joke, too. One of the best gags is in Alan Hollinghurst's novel "The Spell," which turns on the effect Ecstasy has on a buttoned-up central character, the gay, shy thirty-six-year-old diplomat Alex:

> "I find I've overcome a lot of crusty old prejudices," Alex summed up. "Until last week, I was appalled by the idea of drugs, as you know I thought pop music was witless rubbish, I really couldn't be doing with the noise and trash of the gay scene, I hated chewing-gum and trainers and baseball caps with writing on, in fact any clothes with writing on the outside. And now I think they're all absolutely marvellous."

Notice that even here the comedy is about snobbery—about the difference between getting it and not getting it, and also, at a deeper level, about whether "it" is worth getting.

When you take a broad overview of what has been written about drugs, you can't resist the conclusion that it doesn't add up to much. "Artificial Paradises" and "Bright Lights, Big City," "Naked Lunch" and "The Basketball Diaries," "The Doors of Perception" and "Trainspotting": it's not a bad list—all these books are worth reading—but no one could pretend that drugs have given us anything resembling a canon of major writing. Not much of the news it has brought us is truly new. (I would sneak in an exemption to this general rule for Denis Johnson's astonishing "Jesus' Son.") At the end of "The Road of Excess," Boon imagines that somewhere a young person in a bedroom is writing a book called "The K Hole." That young ketamine fiend may have trouble remembering what he or she wrote—but this, too, like so much else about drug writing, is nothing new. In 1819, when Sir Walter Scott read the proofs of "The Bride of Lammermoor," which he had written while taking laudanum, "he claimed that he did not recognise a single character, incident or conversation found in the book."

This is not to say that our decades-long recreational-drug binge has had no effect on the arts. It might not have had much effect on literature, but there is one art form that has been shaped from top to bottom by drugs, and that would not exist in anything like its current form without them: music. The effect of drugs and the culture of drugs permeate the story of popular music. This is perhaps clearest in the case of jazz. The story of dope-fiend writers is interesting, but the history of dope-fiend jazz musicians is the history of jazz: Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Billie Holiday were all on heroin, Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie smoked marijuana, and this is only the A-list. It is probably no accident that the jazz musicians' drugs of choice have tended to affect the perception of time and tempo. Jazz fans often claim to be able to tell the difference between a record made on marijuana and one made on heroin—indeed, I was once told that if I ever wanted to know what taking heroin felt like all I had to do was listen to Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue." Amphetamines and hallucinogens have been central to the history of rock and pop music, and as for dance music—well, you don't have to be a frequent traveller to the K-hole to know that the music doesn't really make sense without the pills to help you experience it. When we are drawing up a list of what drugs have done for us, or to us, popular music in all its forms is the biggest single entry on the credit side of the ledger. Unless, of course, you don't like it, in which case you truly have good reason for wishing Thomas De Quincey had never been born. ♦

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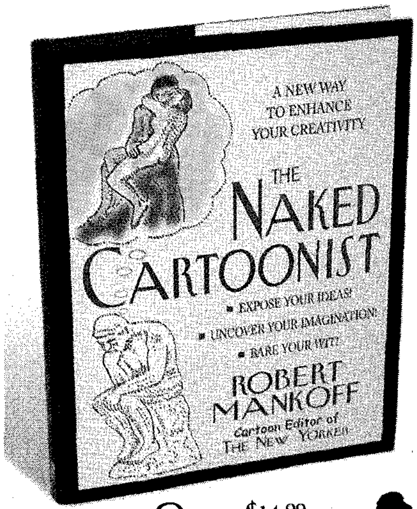
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BRIEFLY NOTED

Bet Your Life, *by Richard Dooling (HarperCollins; $25.95).* Throughout his career, Dooling has written socially relevant satires that take aim at corrupt professional institutions; here he targets the insurance industry. Carver Hartnett, the protagonist, works at Reliable Allied Trust in Omaha, where, along with his colleagues Miranda Pryor (a seductive tease with a deceptively innocent past) and Lenny Stillmach (a brilliant burnout with substance-abuse issues), he investigates insurance fraud. When Lenny turns up dead after a particularly strenuous session of an online shoot-'em-up game, Carver enlists Miranda to help solve the mystery, and soon believes that she may be involved. The labyrinthine plot, pitched in tone midway between John Grisham and Carl Hiassen, ostensibly focusses on viatical benefits, in which the policies of the terminally ill are bought by a company at a cut rate, thus allowing the dying to live out their final days with ample cash. There are plenty of detours, too, into Internet chat rooms, medical ethics, and drug culture, and the result is like the fraudulent insurance files Carver investigates: messy but fascinating.

Rumpole Rests His Case, *by John Mortimer (Viking; $24.95).* After a hiatus of six years, Horace Rumpole emerges once again in a cloud of smoke, wiping butter from his chin after a cutthroat breakfast with She Who Must Be Obeyed at Froxbury Mansions, to wrestle with the forces of justice down at the Old Bailey. As he himself would be the first to admit, Rumpole is growing long in the tooth, but his wit has not deserted him; indeed, it seems to have cleaved onto his person, like his yellowing wig. Almost half the stories here involve the mayhem that ensues when elderly gentlemen succumb to the urging of their addled hearts. Not Rumple, though, who, as ever, sees through a glass of Château Thames Embankment darkly. Mortimer is in high form here. Is this to be the last of Rumpole? Perish the thought.

By the Sword, *by Richard Cohen (Random House; $29.95).* Throughout this history of "swordplay"—from its first depiction, in an ancient Egyptian mural, down to modern tournaments where hits are logged by electronic sensors—Cohen draws upon his own experience as a sabreur who represented England in the Olympics. (One impressive photograph shows him in midair, executing a "horizontal flèche.") He concentrates, naturally enough, on the Western fencing tradition, of which he is a product—its manuals, masters, champions, famous duels, and lore. Cohen loves the punctilious dressage of fencing—citing with approval the Victorian masters who honed their pupils' footwork by making them stand on tea trays—and is particularly drawn to instances where this vanished world has given us a cultural legacy. Men button their coats left over right, he says, to accommodate the swords that are no longer by their sides, and we shake hands, apparently, to show that we are not about to draw our swords. His narrative style, too, with its outspoken opinions and talk of fair play, embodies the "heroic archaism" that so evidently delights him.

Jab, *by Mark Halliday (Chicago; $14).* Writing as a baby boomer chagrined to find his dreams intact after decades of mild disappointment, Halliday is not fashionable. He is prolix and quotidian, a Whitman in a supermarket, a confessional poet who does not take himself very seriously. In one poem, he answers a colleague's challenge: "Poems should be aggressively fictive / since fictivity is mandated anyway. I *guess* I dig." His cool patter skewers pomposity—and itself, being so self-consciously out of date. Halliday speaks in dissonant cultural registers, defying irony: "To dissolve into a category, / is that why I marched this far . . . / lugging these bags and parcels bedecked with surprising stickers?"

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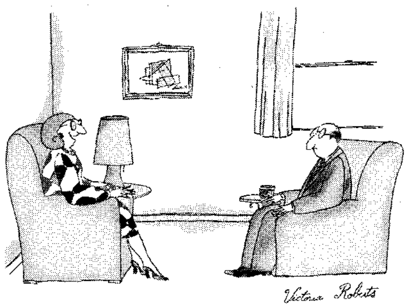

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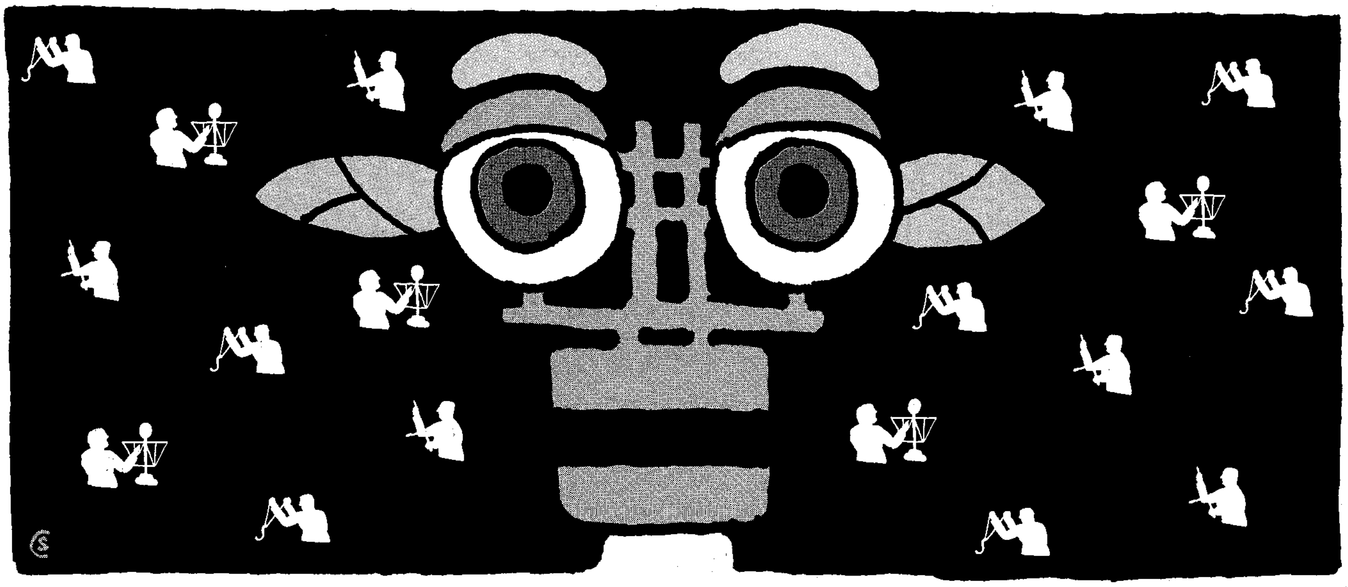
MUSICAL EVENTS

OPERA AS HISTORY

“Sophie’s Choice” in London; a Steve Reich extravaganza in Berlin.

BY ALEX ROSS



In Reich’s high-tech opera “Three Tales,” a singing robot named Kismet foreshadows a world ruled by technology.

SEYMOUR CHWAST

Opera houses are supposed to be fantasy places, where outlandish lovers meet and villains spiral to their inevitable fates. To present an opera about the Holocaust—as the composer Nicholas Maw has done, with “Sophie’s Choice,” which recently had its première in London—shuts down the usual rituals of escape. I was surely not the only one at the Royal Opera House who felt a kind of aesthetic panic when, toward the end of the evening, the tenor Jorma Silvasti came onstage as Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, singing about crematorium construction. Are there limits to what music can express? Should such evilness be sung, made to sound half beautiful? At the edge of the tolerable, the opera has given us a glimpse of what Hannah Arendt called the “word-and-thought-defying” mystery of the Nazi mind.

“Sophie’s Choice” is based on the grand, harrowing novel by William Styron, which follows a spiritually wounded Polish Catholic woman back in time, from a boarding house in Flatbush into the inferno of Auschwitz. The opera also takes sidelong glances at Alan J. Pakula’s film version, which starred Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline. It is an astonishingly ambitious conception, but Maw—a sixty-seven-year-old, cherub-faced Englishman, who is currently on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory—has always had a world-conquering strain: in 1987, he completed a ninety-minute-long orchestral piece called “Odyssey,” which sounds like all of Richard Strauss’s tone poems played simultaneously. Some may wonder, listening to “Sophie’s Choice,” whether Maw’s neo-Romantic, pan-Germanic style achieves sufficient philosophical distance from its subject; after all, Wagner, Bruckner, and Strauss were featured on the soundtrack of Nazism. Yet this composer has unswerving faith in the nobility of his inherited language, and the score gives the impression of music brooding deeply over its own tormented past.

Clocking in at four hours, the opera is also deeply long. Maw wrote his own libretto, which may have been unwise. As John Harbison recently showed, with “The Great Gatsby,” composers who adapt literary texts sometimes get lost in the shady groves of their favorite phrases. The first part of “Sophie’s Choice”—in which Stingo, a young Southern writer, gets to know, or thinks he gets to know, Sophie and her lover, Nathan—is dramatically slack. The novel is able to give brief, frightful snapshots of Sophie’s past, but the opera has trouble getting out of Brooklyn, a difficult borough to orchestrate. The music has a forced joviality; there are too many passages in robust triplet rhythms, redolent of the cow-pat symphonies of the English school. For a long time, we seem to be stuck inside an oddball Anglo-Jewish “Streetcar Named Desire.”

In the second part, which consists of two long acts run together in a two-hour marathon, Maw finally rises to the occasion. Far-flung string lines, sustained with phenomenal concentration by the Covent Garden orchestra, under Simon Rattle’s direction, seek but do not find the repose of transcendence—there is no “ah” of arrival, nor should there be. Maw, an idiosyncratic harmonic thinker and an orchestrator of surpassing brilliance, gives even the plainest chords a glint of steel. The scene of the choice, in which one of the camp doctors forces Sophie to make his selection for him, has thunderous impact, and, after an interlude worthy of Strauss’s “Elektra,” the exorcism seems complete.

The production, by Trevor Nunn,

handled diverse locales handsomely, but it made only a token gesture toward the horror of Auschwitz. The work deserves a bigger, weightier production. The music, however, could hardly have been better sung or played. Angelika Kirchschlager gave a fiercely expressive performance as Sophie, taking her voice from warm mezzo regions toward the heights of a dramatic soprano. Rodney Gilfry brought vocal heft and physical grace to the role of Nathan, though he was unconvincing as a mad genius. Dale Duesing did a remarkable turn as the ever-lurking Narrator; he sang eloquently and made his face a mirror of the action. Gordon Gietz was robust as young Stingo; Silvasti and Alan Opie courageously tackled the unrewarding roles of Commandant Höss and the Doctor. Rattle lit up the entire piece with the heat of his belief.

The night before the "Sophie's Choice" première, the Hebbel Theatre, in Berlin, staged Steve Reich's "Three Tales." This work, too, challenges our preconceptions of what an opera stage can sustain. A high-tech operation involving voices, instruments, recordings, and video images, "Three Tales" conjures up, in the space of about an hour, the crash of the Hindenburg, the Bikini Atoll atom-bomb tests, and the cloning of Dolly the sheep. On paper, it looks to be a typical avant-garde hootenanny, decipherable only to initiates. But it is a major work, a sneaky sort of tragic masterpiece, whose sounds and images haunt the mind for days. I saw it on the first icy, Siberian night of the Berlin winter, and I found myself consumed by a mounting sense of dread, such as one experiences during only the most intense evenings of theatre. Perhaps the most unnerving thing about "Three Tales"—is there a faint echo of Poe in the title?—is that Reich seems to be mourning a catastrophe that has not yet taken place. It is as if a superior, sensitive robot mind were looking to the time when the human race begins to be obliterated by machines.

"Three Tales" has received immediate worldwide attention—there have been productions in New York, Paris, London, Vienna, and elsewhere—because Reich is the most original musical thinker of our time. Minimalism in its classic form was essentially his invention, but for him it was only a beginning. In the past decade and more, Reich has been developing ideas about how speech generates melody and rhythm, and he has built up a series of works—"Different Trains," "The Cave," and now "Three Tales"—from musically suggestive fragments of recorded voices. The technique resembles Janáček's assimilation of ordinary Czech conversation in operas such as "Jenufa" and "The Cunning Little Vixen"; in Reich, as in Janáček, speech-melody creates an extraordinary transparency, so that whatever voice or mood or psychology is under examination hovers right in front of you. "Different Trains" is Reich's Holocaust piece, and, in its infinitely mournful montage of survivors' voices, string-quartet figures, and the sounds of trains, it says as much in thirty-five minutes as "Sophie's Choice" does in four hours.

In "Three Tales," as in many previous pieces, Reich has worked in close collaboration with the video artist Beryl Korot, his wife and creative partner. There is no staging as such, though from time to time the singers move ritualistically from one position to another. The action is in the images, which start, stop, slow down, and repeat in unpredictable rhythms. The Hindenburg burns and crashes so many times that it becomes an abstraction of fire, with all the shock of the image bled away. The episode about Bikini Atoll is concerned less with the atomic explosion than with the evacuation of King Judah's people from the island: the procession of their livestock looks like the one to Noah's Ark. Several leitmotivs move through all three sections: the low hum of the Hindenburg's engines becomes the roar of a B-29 bomber named Dave's Dream, and the ominous drone recurs in the final section, as Reich and Korot present fragments of interviews with an array of scientific experts, some of whom are straight-facedly discussing the possibility of a superhuman race of clones.

The music of "Three Tales" works on the ears in an almost subliminal way. On first encounter, it seems static and didactic: this was my reaction on hearing a preliminary version of the Hindenburg section, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in 1998. I did not realize how Reich's harmony, with its ever-changing masses of suspended tones, would escalate tension over the hour-long span. These fraught and unresolved chords are agents of dramatic irony, foreshadowing, like Verdi's or Wagner's chords of fate, a bad end; they give a doomy ring to the overconfident pronouncements of Reich's "characters," who include a pompous newsreel announcer extolling the Hindenburg, a United States Army spokesman assuring us that atomic destruction will shortly be turned to "the benefit of all mankind," and a "cybernetics professor" named Kevin Warwick, who says, "The human body is extremely limited. I would love to upgrade myself."

The "Three Tales" company—consisting of the members of the Ensemble Modern and the singers of Synergy Vocals, all under the direction of Bradley Lubman—performed like a flawless machine. There was, perhaps, a certain paradox in this feast of precision: even as the composer casts doubt on technology, he avails himself of the latest advances. But Reich's high-tech manipulations are always rooted in the singsong cadences of human voices, so that the entire work moves with the unpredictable energy of a living thing. What is more, "Three Tales," for all its unemotive sleekness, emerges as a surprisingly fervent morality play, pointing a minatory finger not so much at technology itself as at the Faustian hubris that drives it forward. Some of the scientists interviewed in the "Dolly" section do their best to act the part of Mephistophelian villains, their voices dripping with pitiless hauteur. Reich and Korot appear to amuse themselves by replicating these august thinkers' faces on dozens of screens, subjecting their voices to audio surgery, and, on occasion, sending them into a slowed-down, slurry trance, so that they sound like Hal in "2001."

But this is not a farce. Right at the end, there is a chilling little duet for humanity and technology, as Cynthia Breazeal, of M.I.T., converses with a sweet-faced, dulcet-voiced robot named Kismet. "Maybe you'll play with your yellow toy?" she coos, as if talking to a toddler. Kismet shoots her a cool, withering look. Curtain. ♦

THE THEATRE

HEARTBURN

Food and sex in the face of disaster.

BY JOHN LAHR

To the playwright George S. Kaufman, sentiment was an otiose emotion that actually made him shiver. He once suggested to Irving Berlin that he change the opening line of his hit "Always" to "I'll be loving you Thursday." Wit was Kaufman's way of broadcasting indifference, but if satire closed on Saturday night, as he famously observed, he was smart enough to know that the bittersweet could run and run—which is why his partnership with the sentimental popular novelist Edna Ferber proved so fruitful. One of the most successful of their six collaborations, "Dinner at Eight" (revived at the Vivian Beaumont, at Lincoln Center, under the direction of Gerald Gutierrez) offers a glimpse of the de-luxe life in the dog days of the Depression, reminding us, seventy years later, of the first time the acrid aroma of collapse and rapacity pervaded American life.

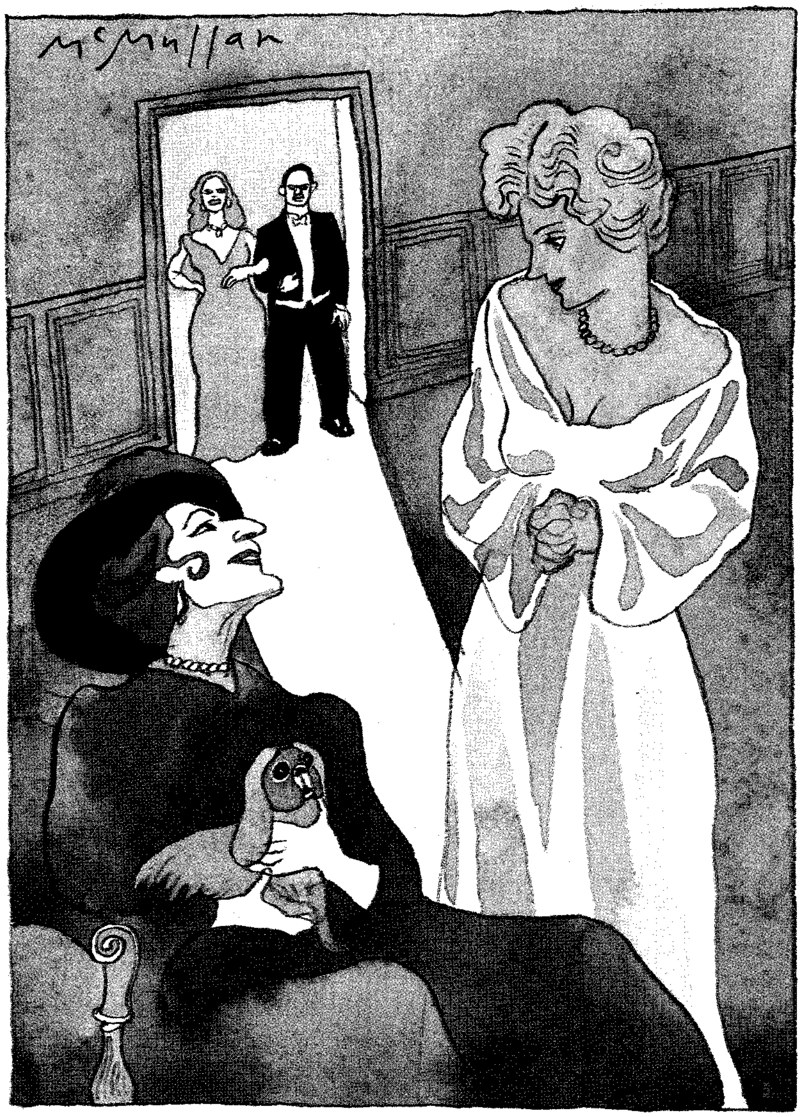
In "Dinner at Eight," Kaufman and Ferber created a kaleidoscope of narratives, both upstairs and downstairs, that lead, by turns, to the fiasco of the eponymous dinner—to which the characters sit down just as the curtain falls for good. Here, before the play begins and at the start of all three acts, the splendiferous table on which the dinner will be served hovers like a crown, candelabra flickering, silver service glistening, about five feet above the stage—bringing a deft Expressionistic touch to a play that is otherwise lumbered by its naturalism. The table floats in abstract space like a Platonic ideal of wealth. A totem of conspicuous waste, it is the destination toward which all twenty-eight characters are directed. By the time they get there, what appeared to be a fishbowl has turned into a shark tank. Mrs. Oliver Jordan (Christine Ebersole), the social-climbing wife of a shipping magnate (James Rebhorn), is preparing to "pounce" on a couple of newly arrived British aristos, the Ferncliffes. Her ailing husband is losing the family business in a corporate raid. The maid marries the butler, only to discover that he's a bigamist. The Jordans' daughter (Samantha Soule) cheats on her fiancé with a clapped-out matinée idol, and then breaks off her engagement without realizing that her actor has killed himself. Even the Pekinese that enters under the arm of the preening, hilarious Carlotta Vance (Marian Seldes, having a field day) suggests devastation to come. "He's so spoiled since I brought him to America," Carlotta announces to the assembled booboisie. "Aren't you, Mussolini?" Farce is simply tragedy speeded up. Nevertheless, at the finale, after everyone has gone in to dinner, the play's stage directions call for "a romantic, throbbing Hungarian waltz." Despite the loss and disaster we've witnessed, the playwrights tell us, as conversation and laughter ring out offstage, the party—the gala that is America—must go on.

"Dinner at Eight" is a play from an earlier, class-ridden time. It is one of the ironies of democratic progress that most modern actors don't understand the pride and prowess of servants or the nonchalance and imperiousness of patricians. Much of the humor is, therefore, lost in the translation, and an absence of psychological subtext and an abundance of exposition make this old theatrical war-horse fiendishly hard to play. On the night I saw it, the actors cantered gamely through the windy prose, and the dialogue offered some incidental pleasures. But afterward, thinking about the show, I was reminded of a perplexed bridge partner of Kaufman's, who looked down at a rubber and asked him how he should have played it. "Under an assumed name," Kaufman said.

There is no playwright on the planet these days who is writing better than Neil LaBute, whose magnificent new play, "The Mercy Seat" (at the MCC Theatre, at the Acorn), only goes to prove that it's always darkest before it's totally black. For a hundred minutes, the audience seems to hold its breath as Sigourney Weaver and Liev Schreiber, giving performances of a depth and concentration that haven't been seen in New York for many seasons, take us through the torment of two lovers the day after September 11, 2001—the day, it turns out, that they are faced with the decision of whether to slip away from New York and start a new life together.

LaBute, who also directs, is a subtle storyteller, and his furtive heart reveals itself through cunning, powerful indirection. Here, he lets the accumulation of detail—a loft apartment, its high windows white with dust; a man's long, pensive silence as he ignores a ringing cell phone on the sofa beside him; the faint sound of fire engines—lure the imagination into a numbed terrain of unspoken desperation. At first, the man—Ben—appears to be a dazed survivor of the catastrophe (which he missed, we learn later, because he happened to have stopped off at the apartment of his boss and mistress of three years, Abby, who was giving him a blow job at the time the planes hit the Twin Towers). Thirty-something, married with two daughters, sexually confident but emotionally bewildered, Ben has all the backbone of a chocolate éclair. He is a slippery character, so used to covering his tracks that he is no longer able to find himself. The moral maze he inhabits is accompanied by a linguistic one, a confounding smoke screen of unfinished sentences—a sort of syntactical stuttering—in which the word "whatever" suffices to stonewall any attempt he makes to think himself out of it.

He is like one of those jungle animals that survive an attack by playing dead. Abby, by contrast, has a vocabulary; she is a kind of conscience, albeit a steely, sarcastic one. More than a decade older than Ben, she fulfills the motherly function of reflecting him back to himself. As she enters the apartment, after a foray to the market, Ben's ringing phone prompts her to ask if he has made "the call." She is speaking of a call to his family to say that he is alive. "I'm . . . I was, ahh . . . I was going to, maybe," Ben says, gazing straight ahead. "I keep trying to. . . . Yeah, but . . . but I'm . . . " The words trail off into entropy. Late in the play, Abby asks Ben if he loves her. "Abby . . . of course. You know that, I . . . yeah," he says. "That's really not the same as just saying it," she replies. Her sharp jabs pick away at Ben's guardedness ("I'm not sure anyone could ever *know* Ben Harcourt"), his philistinism ("You're just, like, a complete cultural moron"), his plan to seize what he calls "the opportunity" to reinvent himself as a new man with a clean slate by running away ("your, you know, *Lazarus* thing"), and his childishness ("You're like a twelve-year-old").



"Dinner at Eight" captures the de-luxe life in the dog days of the Depression.

JAMES MCMULLAN

It is not hyperbolic to say that in "The Mercy Seat" Schreiber does for emotional ambivalence what Brando did for sexuality in "A Streetcar Named Desire"—his is the uncanny, defining performance of a remote soul, paralyzed by guilt and grief. Schreiber has a strapping muscular body and a chubby-cheeked baby face; he shuffles and flops his way around the stage with his shirttail out, obsessively knotting his fingers and playing with his tie. He is, in other words, an adolescent trapped in a man's body. And, like all adolescents, he wants everything all the time. He wants Abby; he wants his kids; he wants to be perceived as heroic; he wants redemption and absolution without having to work for them. His plan—which he calls his "meal ticket"—would allow him to avoid guilt, ignominy, even himself. Pushed by Abby to articulate why he wants to bolt rather than admit he's alive and divorce his wife, he says, "She would have buried me on a divorce, you know that." Ben, as he acknowledges, repeatedly takes the path of least resistance. "This *is* me," he says to Abby. "I always take the easy route, do it faster, simpler, you know, whatever it takes to get it done, be liked, get by. That's me. Cheated in school, screwed over my friends, took whatever I could get from whomever I could take it from."

But, if they are going to have a life together, Abby argues, it must be an honorable one. "You, umm, you want me to . . . what, make the call that I was gonna make yesterday, right?" he says. "That's what I want. Yes . . . I need you to do it for me," Abby replies. "*You* have to choose," she tells him. But to make a choice you must have the confidence that you can survive the consequences. Ben doesn't want to choose, because he doesn't want to lose; he seems doomed to immaturity. And, by the time he finally admits to Abby that he is "a little lost right now," she is no longer willing to help him find his way. "I'm not gonna give you any cash or maps, or, you know, *waterproof matches*," she says. "I'm not Harriet Tubman." As the curtain falls, LaBute's hero is, both literally and symbolically, in the same place where he began: staring into space alone, as the phone rings.

A song by the Smiths, the defiant "How Soon Is Now?" ("You shut your mouth / How can you say / I go about things the wrong way"), played the curtain up; now the band's hymn to suicide, "Asleep" ("Sing me to sleep / Sing me to sleep / and then leave me alone"), brings the curtain down. This sense of exhaustion—of being fed up with lacerating internal arguments—is a new note in LaBute's lugubrious music. In the preface to "The Mercy Seat," LaBute says, "I have no idea why I wrote this play. Really, I don't." I think he does. Political terrorism sometimes calls out other kinds of terrorism, one form of which LaBute calls "the painful, simplistic warfare we often wage on the hearts of those we profess to love." Here, with extraordinary daring and elegance, he faces the division in every heart, including his own. History will decide if "The Mercy Seat" is a great play; certainly, for me, it is the work of a master. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

FANTASYLAND

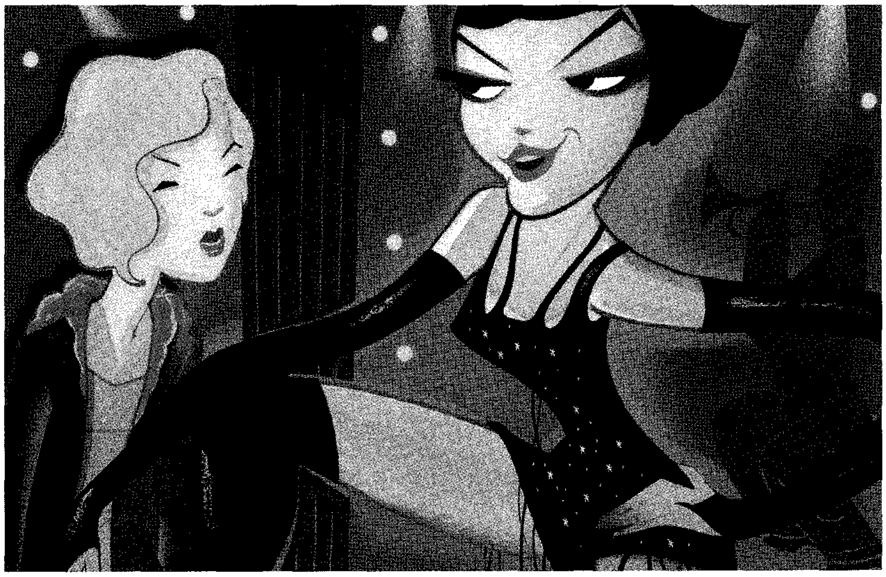
"Chicago" and "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers."

BY ANTHONY LANE

As the opening credits of 2003 begin to roll, two big thunderers are slugging it out. "Chicago" is a musical and "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers" is three hours of epic; the garter belt is to one film what the horned helmet is to the other, although I shall not slake your curiosity by revealing which is which. Both films are to be commended for venturing into genres that were until recently viewed as dilapidated, vacant, and overpriced. All we need now is the return of the religious barnstormer, and the revival will be complete. Even as we speak, Ben Affleck may be combing his beard for the leading role of Jonah, with Nathan Lane as the whale.

"Chicago" stars Catherine Zeta-Jones as Velma Kelly and Renée Zellweger as Roxie Hart. Each is a man-killer, and each resides in jail, plotting her defense with the silken legal help of Billy Flynn (Richard Gere). The time is, I would guess, the late nineteen-twenties, although the setting is so stylized, so shamelessly grounded in a hundred other shows and films, that "Chicago" barely qualifies as a period piece; indeed, it merrily jabs at the celebrity-lust of our own era. In the strongest and most biting number, Roxie perches on Billy's lap like a dummy—limbs turned to sticks, spots of red on her rounded cheeks—and chants the melodies that he, the attorney as ventriloquist, feeds into her mouth. Behind them, the ladies and gentlemen of the press jerk on wires, yanked from on high by a second Billy, and compete to do his bidding. As a musical demonstration of spin, it couldn't be meaner.

The only hitch is that I cannot for the life of me name that tune. The songs in "Chicago" crash in one ear, barge around your brain for a minute or two, then make a swift exit through the other ear, never to be heard again. This may mark me as a Rodgers and Hammerstein junkie, but I can't help feeling that the fustiness lies with Kander and Ebb, whose music and lyrics operate on the old-fashioned principle that every song should be a showstopper, regardless of whether the show deserves to be stopped. As I left the movie, my skull was humming more than I was; much violence is perpetrated in the course of the plot, as each of the jailbirds recounts her capital offense, but the real harm is done to the senses of the people in the audience, who will find themselves in the unusual position of being snarled up in fishnets and assaulted by sequins. Is there anything, in art or in life, less sexy than the incorrigible, twenty-four-hour desire to trumpet one's sexiness to the world? We are meant to be blown away by the sultry airs of this picture, but the very surfeit of them spoils the plan. When Cyd Charisse laid an endless leg across the screen in the "Broadway Ballet" sequence of "Singin' in the Rain," or when she and Fred Astaire offered a tribute to Mickey Spillane in "The Band Wagon," we understood that the hardboiled style was already a soft target, and that the landscape of gumshoes, pimps, and dames with Louise Brooks hair styles had become a nice, pliable gag for choreographers. Yet here comes "Chicago," almost half a century later, kitting its heroine out with a black bob and inviting us to take our randy noir straight up.



Renée Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones as the man-killers.

Rob Marshall, the director, does his best to leave the stage show behind, but the cards are stacked against him, for "Chicago" is a pack of theatrical tricks. Whether it's the towering grid of prison bars or the huge red "Roxie" that flashes behind Renée Zellweger, we sense a flatness of dimension, a reluctance to stretch the story's depth of field. What Marshall does, by way of compensation, is to edit his way out of trouble, cutting away furiously during not only each song but almost every line of each song, as though not daring to presume that younger viewers will be able to stomach more than four and a half seconds of inviolate music. This is hectic on the eye and bad for the confidence; we start to wonder, ungallantly, about the camera's chronic wish to glance aside—could it be that the performers might not weather its unstinting gaze? A head-on scene of Gene Kelly tap-dancing is bliss, but the same view of Richard Gere is not kind.

This is hardly Gere's fault; no skill is more baffling than tap—how can the staccato turn largo and liquid like that? Gere also strips to his underwear; whether he does this in the interests of gender equality or whether, for a practicing Buddhist, it is an established spiritual technique for paring life down to its essentials, I am not qualified to judge. The only player to conquer "Chicago" is Catherine Zeta-Jones, who is no Charisse in her motions but who gets by on a full tank of unleaded oomph. The film is hard, however, on Renée Zellweger. If there is any living star who could strap herself into heels like scalpels and then strut and bray, all by her lonesome, against a background of inky black, with the camera hunkered down ringside so that it can peer up her shimmering nano-dress, I can't name her. Many people will get off on the highs of this picture, but they might want to ask why there are no other levels. Musicals depend on the contest of innocence and experience, and we are just not culturally equipped to provide that mix anymore. Lovers of the classic form were prepared to believe that it was natural—more of a thirsty emotional need than a luxury—for a character to break into song, whereas nowadays that perversity has to be explained. Most of the numbers in "Chicago" are meant to unfurl within Roxie's imagination, and even then you can hear the grinding gear change as the action readies itself for a tune. I admire the punch of this movie, but not for a second, as the dancers wriggled and raged, did I get that delicious, redeeming sense that life can be lived on the hoof.

Once you have clambered over the craggy title, "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers" is a fairly easy ride. Never in three hours did I look at my watch, nor cast my eyes toward the sun as it westered unto the havens of Eriador. Around me rose a few clucks from confirmed Tolkienites, frustrated at the loss of a favorite line from the novel. Were the movie to map every detail of the Master's work, though, the result would not be three hours long. It would be three years long.

In the event, the director, Peter Jackson, has crunched and tidied the book. Hundreds of pages pass, for example, in which the author allots so much space to Gimli (a dwarf), Legolas (an elf), and Aragorn (a real man) that we all but forget about Frodo and Sam, the hobbits bearing the Ring to its doom—in a volcano handily named Mount Doom, which must make it easy to ask for directions. Onscreen, Jackson braids the two strands together, adding the tale of fellow-hobbits Merry and Pippin, who, in a twist guaranteed to make environmentalists spill their carrot juice for joy, are literally hugged by trees. We also get flying dragons, a breathless opening sequence in which Gandalf (Ian McKellen) plummets down a belching abyss, and a flawless white horse that, if you give a little whistle, gallops in from nowhere, though only in slow motion. And lo, the name of this steed is Shadowfax, or, as it was told in the olden tongue, Palmpilot. Then, there is Gollum.

Gollum, who guides Frodo on his quest, is white-skinned and blue-veined, like a moldering cheese, and his shrunken frame is topped by a triangular head with protruding eyes. Think of Ross Perot after ten years on the Atkins diet, and you're almost there. There are two problems with Gollum, who used to be known as Sméagol before he entered the witness-protection program. First, he gives the movie a chance for psychological inquiry—the one thing it doesn't require. "The Lord of the Rings" is an epic, and one of the defining restrictions—not to say pleasures—of epic is that it both predate and outwit psychology. Motives, good and ill, may be thwarted or confounded, but you don't read Tolkien for the niceties of tangled minds; you read him for pace and wonder, and the virtues of Jackson's trilogy, thus far, have been pace and astonishment, which is almost the same thing.

Second, Gollum was forged on computer and planted inside the frame. Nobody could quibble with the vitality of the result, but there's the rub—his creators are so pleased with their baby that they can't help showing him off, and we get far more of his hisses and writhings than we need. This is a pity, and we may have to accept that, for those fooling around with brand-new technologies, the toys are simply too much fun. When you are the kind of exuberant artist, as Jackson is, who visualizes a giant tree that can both walk the walk and talk the talk, you can hardly be blamed if, in the deepest sense, you end up rooting for it.

Besides, the gimmickry of this production does encourage a new magniloquence. There is nothing in "Chicago" that would dazzle or bewilder Stanley Donen, let alone Busby Berkeley, but there are moments in "The Two Towers"—and, in the latter half, an entire axe-wielding hour—that would steam the spectacles of Cecil B. De Mille. In essence, the worthy folk of Edoras, under their king Théoden (Bernard Hill), have retreated to Helm's Deep, where they are besieged by Orcs, Uruk-hai, and other evildoers who come bearing hard consonants. It is a close and vicious fight, but at last the long vowels of Théoden and Aragorn, aided by the soft fricatives of Gandalf, carry the wordy day. When Gandalf arrives with reinforcements, descending a near-vertical slope using horses where you or I would use snowboards, the spirit of triumphant rampage is something rarely glimpsed since the days of Olivier and "Henry V." A friend of mine, ruing the design of "The Fellowship of the Ring," said that it relied on fantasy rather than on folklore, and the charge is difficult to refute; what allows Jackson to animate his pictures, even as they threaten to founder in fantastical gothic, is his knack (again, Olivier-like) for the telling gesture. In the first film, the high point was Legolas (Orlando Bloom) loosing off arrows as swiftly as if he were firing an automatic rifle. This time, the wildest cheer greeted his ability to mount a speeding horse *from the front*—grabbing the bridle, swinging up and around, all without damage to his long blond tresses. I quiver to think what this funky elf has in store for us in Part III, "The Return of the King." If he winds up tap-dancing on the edge of Mount Doom, I won't be remotely surprised. ♦

The New Yorker (ISSN 0028-792X), published weekly (except for six combined issues: Feb. 18 & 25, Apr. 22 & 29, June 17 & 24, Aug. 19 & 26, Oct. 14 & 21, Dec. 23 & 30) by The Condé Nast Publications Inc. (4 Times Square, N.Y., N.Y. 10036-6592), which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers, Inc. Vol. LXXVIII, No. 41, January 6, 2003. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Authorized as second-class mail by the Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada, and for payment of postage in cash. Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian goods-and-services-tax registration number R123242885. Registered as a newspaper at the British Post Office.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The New Yorker, P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037-0684. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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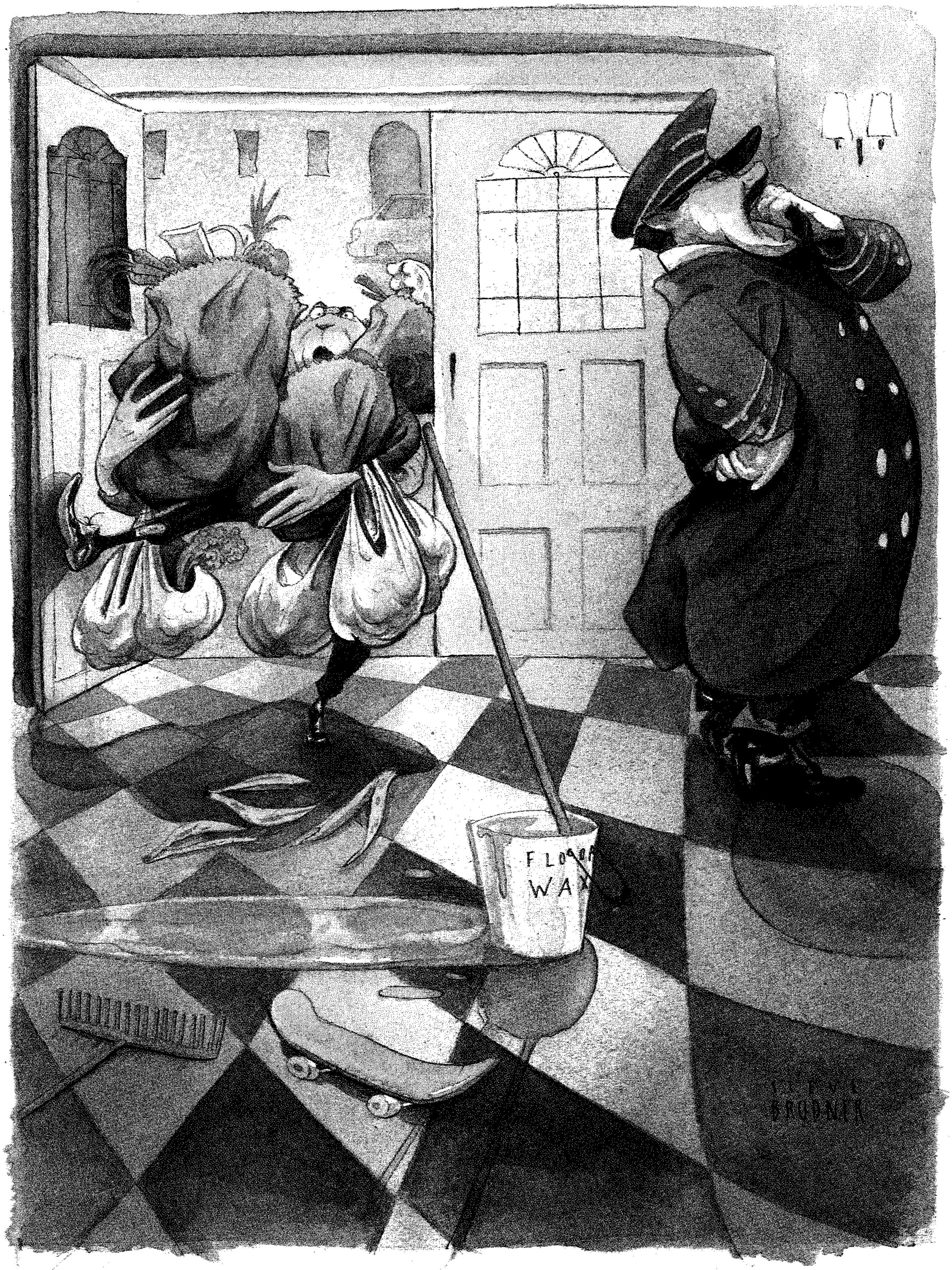
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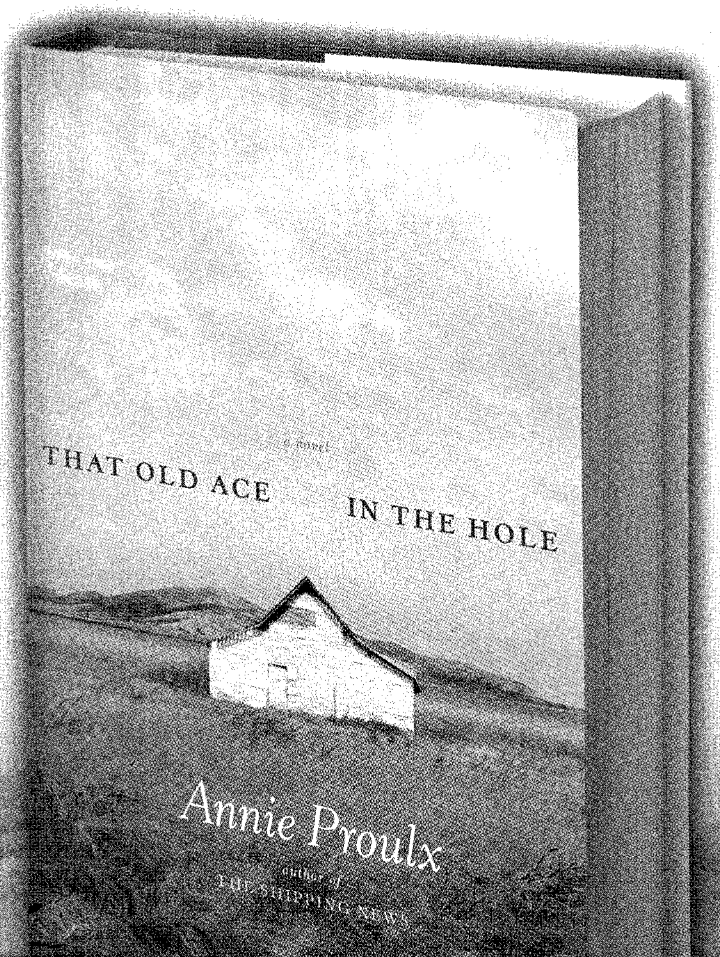
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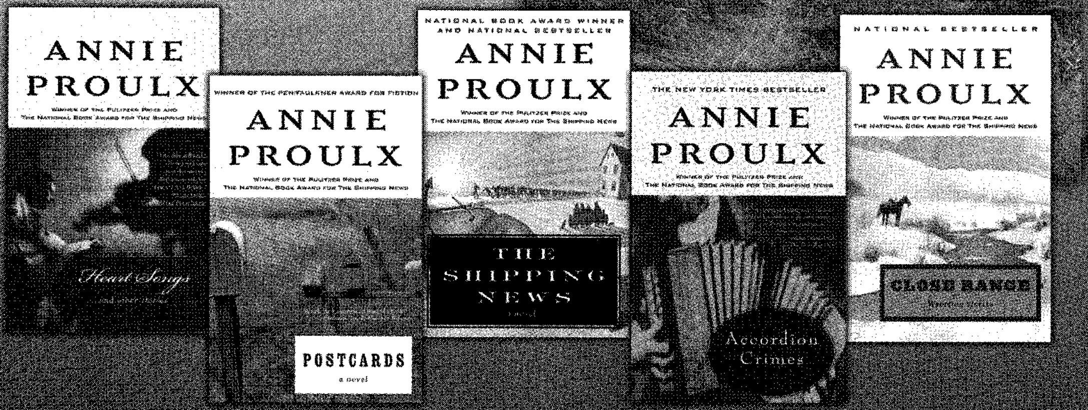
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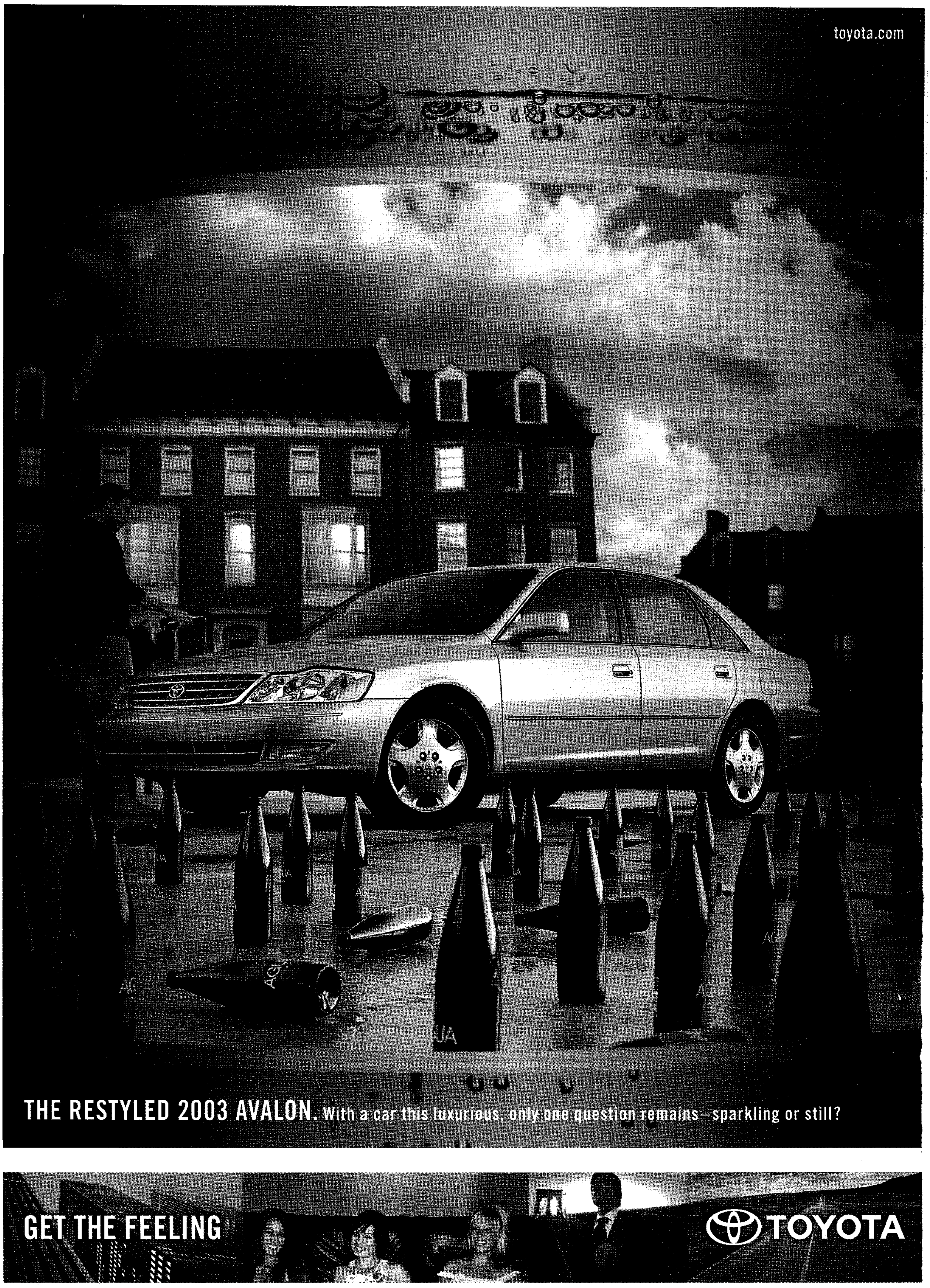

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